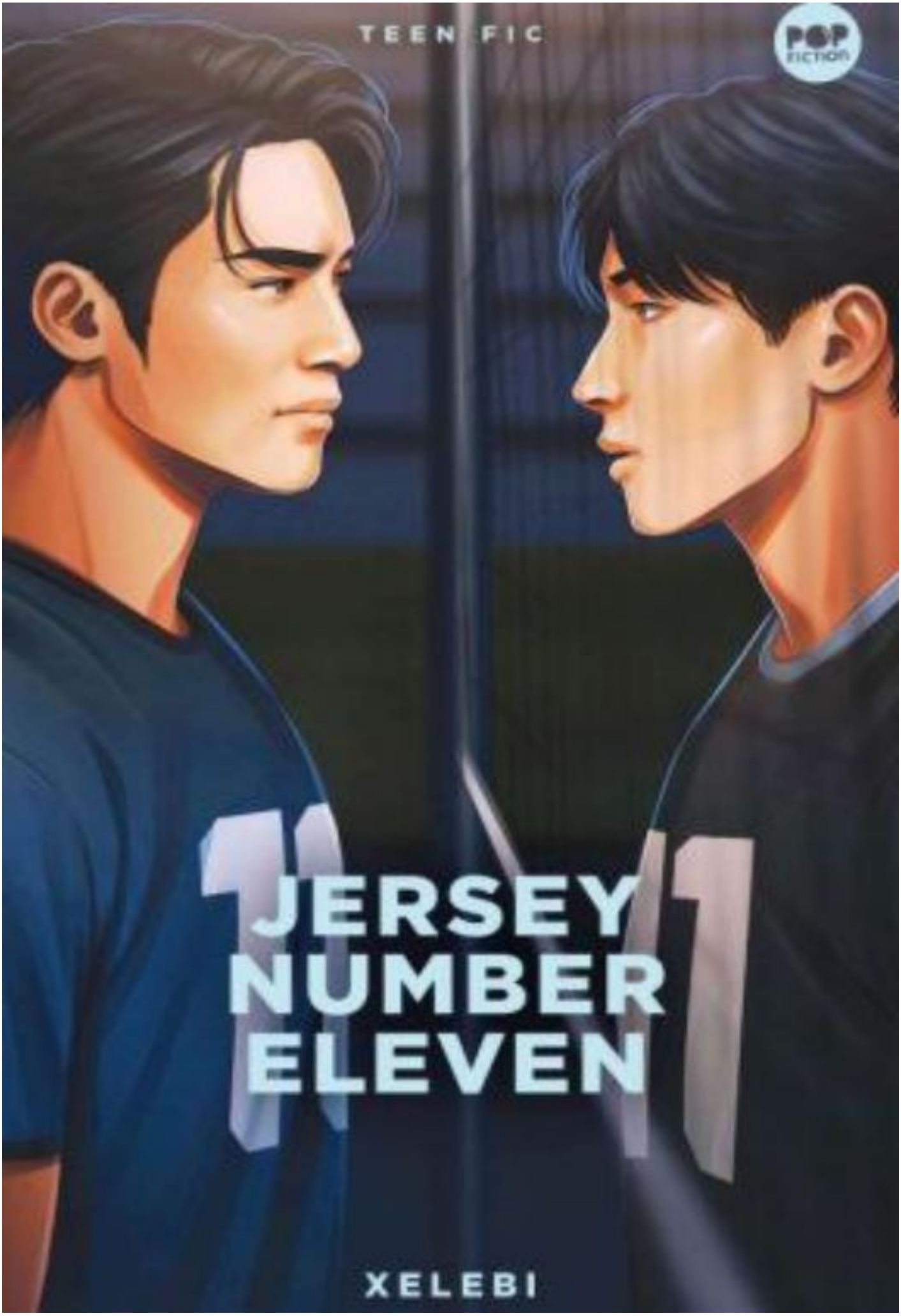
TEEN FIC
POP FICTION
JERSEY NUMBER ELEVEN
XELEBI

Jersey Series #1

• All Rights Reserved © 2023 by xelebi. This is a work of fiction. A BL (Boys' Love) story.

If you're uncomfortable to read, please do not proceed.

Jersey Number Eleven is now published under Summit Media - Pop Fiction.

Original Author: xelebi

English translation: erayaukiyo

Chapters

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
pt.1
13
pt.2
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
Epilogue 1
Epilogue 2
Epilogue 3
Epilogue 4
Special chapter 1
Special chapter 2
Special chapter 3
Side story CxJ pt.1
Side story CxJ pt.2

00

"Westmore University is now at match point!"

The crowd grew even louder, especially on the side of the supporters wearing dark blue t-shirts, cheering for Westmore. They only needed one more point to secure their spot in the finals. The side of the Creston supporters, dressed in white, also cheered, but the noise from the opposing team's side was definitely louder.

"One more! One more! Go, Westmore! Whooo!"
"Let's go Creston U! Fifth set! Fifth set!"

I glanced around the entire arena. It was only now that I noticed how packed the venue truly was. Well, it was the semifinals, after all. Adding to the excitement was the fact that one of the teams playing was Westmore, the defending champion and crowd favorite.

To be honest, I was nervous. I had been since yesterday, actually. The louder the cheers from the supporters of both schools, the faster my heart raced. It was probably the adrenaline. The match had been intense since the first set.

With every point, the crowd clapped and cheered.
With every long rally, they screamed, adding to the pressure.

I looked up at the scoreboard. It was the third set, and the score was 24-23 in favor of Westmore. They had already won the first and second sets. Coming into the semifinals as the number 1 team after the elimination round, they had a twice-to-beat advantage. On the other hand, we were the 4th seed, so we needed to win twice to advance.

"No doubt, Westmore is incredibly strong. We even studied their movements from their past games, but it's really hard to predict how they'll play. Their coaching staff makes quick adjustments, and the players execute them immediately.

It's no surprise that we were crushed in our first match against them during the elimination rounds. Thankfully, we're keeping up with them this time.

They're the defending champions for a reason. Their offense is smart, but I'm even more impressed by their team's defense. Even their middle blocker, who's the tallest, isn't a liability in floor defense. Their libero and outside hitters have superb passing.

Their setter barely has to move from their position because their reception is so smooth. Even their digs are perfectly set up for the setter.

As a libero myself, it's truly amazing.

"Guys, we need one good pass!" Coach started during our timeout. We could barely hear him over the loud drums and the crowd's cheers. "Kai," he called me. "We need good passes, okay?"

"Yes, coach!" I replied, then looked at my teammates. "I'll get the pass, guys!"

"Their transition plays are fast, so we need to attack immediately. Off the block. Use their blockers' hands," Coach added.

"Setter, if the pass to you is good, go for a quick play, okay? If not, give it to your outside hitter. They don't have a libero right now. If there's an opening in the middle, go for a dump. Got it?"

“Yes, coach!” answered Jerome, our setter and team captain.

“Blockers, keep an eye on number eleven,” Coach said, referring to Westmore’s star player. “They’ll go to him in transition, even if he’s in the back row.”

I glanced at the other team when the coach said that.

I saw their players ready to enter the court immediately
even though the timeout wasn't over yet. Wow. It seems like they didn't even talk,
right? It's like they're already sure of what they're going to do to finish this game.

My eyes searched for number eleven.

I saw him, looking seriously at the court while one of his teammates whispered something to him. He plays as an outside hitter and he is their go-to player.

Honestly, he is too fast. His hits are really strong. He also plays smart. He knows when to hit the ball hard and when to drop it. It's annoying too because he often avoids my attacks. It feels good when I block him.

Did I mention that we have the same jersey number? Yep, we both wear number eleven.

I wonder why he is also number eleven? For me, it's my birthdate. April 11.

I probably stared at him/her for too long and then I noticed that he was also looking at me. I subtly looked away and focused again on what the coach was saying.

"Guys, there's no tomorrow if we lose this. Let's fight for this so we can go to a fourth set."

"Yes, coach!"

"One good pass, okay? All spikers, approach," Jerome said as we stacked our hands in the middle.

"A quick attack. I'll set!" I said to them.

"Let's go, guys!"

"Creston!"

"U!" The whole team shouted.

The buzzer sounded. I quickly handed my towel and tumbler to our team manager and returned to the court. The players of Westmore did the same.

Jerome signaled the play to us. We looked at each other and I nodded. I needed to make a good set for us to score quickly. The referee blew the whistle. I got ready to receive while keeping my eyes on the Westmore server.

"Cordova, serving for the match!"

The crowd cheered even louder.

I took a deep breath. You can do this, Kai! One good pass!

Cordova served. He made a safe serve, and thankfully I didn't shank the pass! Thank you, Lord! I would really treat myself to taraflex if I misreceived. That's one of my pet peeves. A libero with no pass? Embarrassing!
"Nice pass!"

Jerome quickly set the ball to Paul, one of our middle blockers, for a B quick.

"Finish it!" I shouted.

However, the Westmore blockers were faster. It seems like they already read what we were going to do! Blocked!

The crowd erupted. I covered their block and the whole arena shook even more. Jerome got the second ball and set it to his opposite. Our ball went through on the second try but Cordova managed to get it. Shit. Their opposite hitter's spike was strong but they still defended it! "

I quickly returned to the back row. It was our turn to defend now. I didn't take my eyes off the ball. At that moment, I already knew we wouldn't be able to block the opponent's attack, so I tried to read what their setter would do.

"Pipe attack!" I heard our coach shout.

And he was right. The setter from Westmore set the ball to number eleven, who was already prepared for a back-row kill.

I don't know if I heard it correctly from the audience, but when number eleven jumped, it felt like everyone held their breath at the same time.

Shit… Number eleven is flying!

He's got hang time in the air!

Where is he going to hit the ball? Is he going to spike it hard? Or will he suddenly change his mind and drop it instead?

He's so hard to read!
I need to strengthen my defense!

But everything happened so fast. One second, the ball was still on Westmore's court. The next thing I knew, my vision went dark as the ball hit me right in the face. I felt myself collapse onto the floor from the force of the impact.

And that's when I realized—this was Westmore's number eleven. Why did I ever think he wouldn't spike the ball hard?

"Roen Alejo wins it for Westmore University!"

Damn. Not only did we lose, but I also got hit in the face. I hope all my front teeth are still intact.

01

"Kai, are you okay?"

I just gave coach a thumbs up while holding the tissue that had gone into my nose. The impact of the ball on my face was so strong that I didn't realize I was already having a nosebleed. That's how strong the hit of number eleven from Westmore was. Thankfully, I didn't get a black eye.

We're now on the bus back to Creston. The whole team is a bit quiet because we lost. It's a shame we lost the 3rd set. If we had won that, we would have had a small chance to push the game to a 5th set.

But honestly, I'm proud of how we played earlier. At least in that 3rd set. We closed the score gap unlike in the first two sets.

But as coach also said, one step at a time. Our goal this season is to make it to the final 4. Which we did. If we make it to the finals, which we know is a bit ambitious, that would be a huge achievement considering our team is in a rebuilding phase. We had a lot of players graduate last year. It's a shame I didn't get to play with them. It's only my first year on the team.

Oh well. We'll make a comeback next season.

I will make a comeback. I need more intense training in reception and floor defense. My goal for next year should be no balls landing easily in my zone.

"Are you okay?" Jerome, who is sitting next to me now, asked.

"Yeah. But I felt so dizzy earlier," I replied. "I didn't see number eleven's ball. It hit me instead."

"That one really hits hard. Kiko?" He pointed to one of our injured middle blockers. "Alejo is the one to blame for why he needs surgery on his two fingers."

My eyes widened. "Really?"

Jerome chuckled and just nodded.

That number eleven is really something else.

But if you think about it, he's really a big guy. He's tall, like he hangs out at the gym. His arms are huge. Maybe if he punches you, your head would come off. It sounds a bit exaggerated but also kind of true.

I felt sorry for the ball.

I hope he's not the type to hit things when he laughs.

But he seems intense only on the court. I realized that earlier when, after they won, instead of celebrating with his teammates, he went straight to me to apologize.

Actually, he kept apologizing. It was evident that he felt really guilty about what happened. So even though my face hurt a lot, I just laughed to ease his nerves. Pretending to be strong back then.

I just said it's part of the game, and I knew he didn't mean to.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's normal to get hurt during the game, but there are times when it's unavoidable. I just got a nosebleed. They even put ice on it earlier.

It seems like number eleven is still not convinced.

If his teammates hadn't called him, he wouldn't have stopped apologizing to me. Even during our handshake under the net, he still asked me if I was okay. Of course, I said I was okay.

He might not be able to sleep tonight.

"Why are you all so quiet?" Coach asked, looking back at us.
"Have you forgotten? Didn't we agree that if you reach 23 points against Westmore, I'll treat you to Korean barbecue?"

"We love you coach!" We all shouted.

And it seems that's all it took to liven up the team again.
It's perfect, and I'm hungry!

So instead of heading back to the dorm, we went straight to a Korean restaurant. My teammates were noisy again until we got there. I couldn't keep up because I think I still feel the aftershock of the facial hit from number eleven earlier.

As we sat down, cooking and eating began immediately. After 30 minutes, I could feel the exhaustion from the game, but I tried to join in with my teammates and coach. They asked me again if my nose was okay, and I just gave them a thumbs up.

I wanted to shower and sleep.

Sleep and sleep until—

I was interrupted from daydreaming in my dorm bed when a notification popped up on IG.

roenalejo11 started following you

I sat up straight and my drowsiness disappeared a bit. Number eleven from Westmore followed me on IG! What's going on?

I quickly clicked on his profile, but it's private. Is this really him? Not a poser, right? Verified, too. He's quite famous. He has a lot of fans and he's also an endorser for a sports drink.

"I don't just follow anyone on IG unless you're a cute rabbit or cat, but because he followed me and I knew him, I requested to follow him back.

And in less than a minute, he immediately confirmed.
I was about to briefly check the contents of his account when he suddenly sent a DM.

roenalejo11: Hi. This is Roen Alejo from Westmore Men's Volleyball team.

I don't know why, but I chuckled at his message. This is too much. He even included his complete name. The only things missing are his position and jersey number, he should have added those too. I believe it's really him on this account because he has a blue check mark.

I was about to type a reply when he messaged again.

roenalejo11: I just want to say sorry again for what happened earlier. I heard your nose bled. Are you doing okay now?

His typing is also intense. Complete with spelling and punctuation marks. When I read it, I suddenly felt pressured. He has more English words in his arsenal than me. It's kind of daunting to reply.

kaireyes: Hello! I'm okay now. Promise! Thank you.

roenalejo11: Are you sure? Do you want us to get it checked at the hospital?

kaireyes: It's okay. I'm really fine now.

roenalejo11: Again, I'm sorry.

Number eleven is all about apologies.

kaireyes: It's nothing. Part of the game. Hehe. Congratulations again to all of you. Good luck in the finals! Go for the gold!

It took a while for number eleven to reply. But he had read my message. I put down my phone and turned my attention back to my companions.

Coach also suggested going home shortly after. Finally! I've been unintentionally making my yawns heard. I'm so tired. I also wanted to decline others who wanted to take pictures, but that would be rude. They asked nicely.

We quickly returned to the dorm. I threw my duffel bag and quickly showered. I beat Jerome to it, as he's always slow. I don't know what they're doing inside the bathroom and why they take so long to shower.

After changing, I threw myself on the bed because I was really sleepy. Nothing can stop me from sleeping.

The season is over. Time to rest from practices. Recharge, then back to the game.

I must have drifted off when I remembered I needed to set an alarm for tomorrow. I still need to pack my things because I'm going home to Baguio. I miss my mom too. It's a shame they couldn't come to watch the game, but it's okay because they might worry since their child got hit in the face.
Instead of setting the alarm first, I checked the message from number eleven sent an hour ago. Did he reply?

roenalejo11: Thank you. By any chance, will you be watching?

kaireyes: No, I won't. But good luck again! For the 3-peat!

After sending that, I set the alarm and finally fell asleep."

02

"Kai, come eat!"

"Yes, mom!" I replied and then got up from the bed.

Wow. I've been here in Baguio for a week now, but the feeling of my bed in my own room is still different. Since I arrived, all I've done is lie down and sleep. Add to that the cold weather even though it's summer. There really is nothing that can beat it here.

I feel like I'm turning into a pig. Aside from sleeping, all I do is eat. It's because my mom keeps cooking delicious dishes. In her eyes, I'm getting thin, so she keeps feeding me all sorts of things.

But I really missed her cooking.

And the ingredients are always fresh here. Our house is also close to the wet market where we can get fresh vegetables and fruits.

However, I'm sure Coach will scold me when I get back to Creston. I feel like I've gained weight again. Oh well. I'll just work out intensely when I get back.

"You're lying down in your room again, Kaizen," my mom said as we were eating.

"It's just so cold. It's hot in Manila," I replied.

"Go out. Join your cousins. You look pale. Your paleness isn't normal."

But what will I do outside? I'm from here. I've been all around Baguio. I know exactly where to find the sweetest strawberries.

I just smiled at my mom and put more rice on my plate. This is my second serving. The dish is so delicious. I asked my mom for strawberry sinigang. It's not healthy, but since I only come home once in a while, I'll indulge.

When I go back to Manila, I'll be a student again. Focus on my grades again. Then before I know it, we'll be back to training because Coach said we'll be joining an off-season tournament.

It's really hard being a student-athlete.

Balancing studies and training is tough. I don't even know how I passed my subjects. I've prayed more times than studied.

I'll be a sophomore next academic year. I'm taking up Applied Corporate Management, and they say the second year is tougher. Aside from aiming for the final 4 for the team next season, my goal is also to maintain my grades if I want to keep playing.

Creston is strict with student-athletes. But then again, we don't pay tuition fees. They even give us an allowance.

I hope I can handle it.

After eating, I accompanied my mom to hang out on the terrace. She wanted to have tea. I'm not a fan of tea, so I had coffee.

I really missed Baguio. Especially moments like these on the terrace of our house. And it's cold. I almost don't want to go back to Manila.

"How are you, son? Did you win?" My dad asked during our video call with my mom. He's in Canada now. He works there as a head nurse. He won't be back until next year. "No, dad," I replied. I even got hit in the face.

"Oh, that's okay. You'll bounce back next time. You can do it," he said, always being supportive ever since I took an interest in volleyball. "Take care there, okay? Always listen to what your coach says."

"Copy, dad."

Actually, I wasn't a sporty kid at all. I was just a skinny kid who coughed three times and then got beat.

I accidentally discovered volleyball when I switched channels on the TV one time. I was in elementary school back then, but I remember that Creston was one of the schools playing. I started eagerly waiting if they had a game every day. Until I wanted to play too. It seemed fun to hit the ball. Coincidentally, our school had a volleyball program, so I tried out. My mom didn't even know about it yet.

I didn't have any basic skills back then. I was just copying what I saw. And because I was small, they made me a libero even though I didn't know what that meant yet.

When I realized the role of a libero, I almost wanted to quit. I wanted to be a spiker. But when I enjoyed defense, I stuck with it. It's more satisfying when you get the opponent's spike.

Then the rest was history.

I grew to love volleyball.

And I am very grateful to have supportive parents. They always accompanied me with my mom and dad whenever we had games in other places. Until I was given the chance to represent the CAR region in the Palarong Pambansa.

It turned out that there were scouts there looking at players and I was recruited by Creston University.

And here I am now, living the dream as Kaizen.

It feels like just yesterday I was an audience member. Now, I'm one of the ones seen on TV because our league is televised.

Wow. I've come such a long way, haven't I? It's amazing.

Next stop? National Team! Let's manifest that!

"Souvenir, huh?" Jerome said when we talked as I returned to my room. I turned around in bed and it seems like sleep is about to win me over.

"Strawberry jam, please. And by the way, strawberry taho."

"How will I bring strawberry taho to the dorm?"

"Put it in a tumbler," he laughed. This guy is really something. "By the way, we're watching the game today. I'm just waiting for Kiko. They're still taking a bath."

"Game?" I asked.

"It's Game 1 of the finals today, right? Westmore versus Easton! We got free tickets."

"Oh, is it today?" I got up and went to the living room to turn on the TV. Just as I changed the channel, number eleven's commercial came on, where he's drinking a sports drink. The pre-game must not have started yet.

Jerome said goodbye, and I went on Instagram while waiting for the game to start. I immediately saw a post from number eleven. It was a picture of the scoreboard at the arena with a caption saying, "*game day*."

"It hasn't been 5 minutes yet since he posted that, but thousands immediately hearted it. Truly famous.
So I hearted it, too.

And speaking of famous! Number eleven slid into my DMs.

roenalejo11: Hey.

I grinned. Can you believe it? I'm chatting with one of the famous players in men's collegiate volleyball in the Philippines.

Is he still feeling guilty about the facial hit he gave me?

kaireyes: Hey. Good luck in the game!

roenalejo11: Thank you ☺

Nice. So he knows how to use emojis. But am I the only one who finds his choice of emoji a bit off? That smile seems creepy. You can't tell if he's angry, holding back, or just smiling to say that he's smiling.

kaireyes: I'll be watching the game.

roenalejo11: You're gonna watch live?

kaireyes: No. Just on our TV here.

roenalejo11: Oh.

kaireyes: I'm currently in Baguio. But my teammates, they'll be there at the arena watching.

roenalejo11: I see.

kaireyes: Do your best. I'm betting on your team.

He read my message but didn't reply. Maybe his coach called him. I tossed my phone aside and started watching. However, I didn't realize I had fallen asleep!

Our TV was off, and it was dark outside. I missed the game! Did number eleven's team win?

I messaged Jerome. "I fell asleep. I missed the game. Who won?"

"Easton. 3-2." That's it. Number eleven's team lost after all."

03

kaireyes: We'll bounce back in game 2!

Sent.

Actually, I've been thinking about whether or not to send that message. I was worried number eleven might think I'm being too friendly.

But it's too late now—I already sent it.

Though, it seems he's not online because he hasn't read my message yet. Maybe they're already training right now. I don't know. That's how our coach is with us when we lose. We go back to the drawing board immediately. He discusses with us what went wrong and what the team lacked during the game.

Or maybe number eleven just isn't online to avoid reading negative comments. Sometimes, those comments come from your own schoolmates. Some of them aren't even constructive criticism anymore—it's just bashing.

Social media can be such a harsh place.

It depends on the person whether they can handle everything they read. Some don't care at all. Some, like me, just avoid looking at comments. And others end up losing their confidence and performance because of it.

I don't understand some people. They don't think before posting things online. They act tough because they're hiding behind their phones. But when they get called out, they play the victim and say the player has an attitude. If only they knew how hard it is to be a student-athlete.

"Good morning, Kai," Mom greeted me when I woke up the next day.

"Morning," I replied, still groggy.

I found her already serving breakfast. I got excited to eat because there was fried rice and tocino. Oh no. I'm really going to gain weight with this. I need to slow down on eating.

While Mom and I ate, she was also on a video call with Dad. Meanwhile, I was watching highlights of number eleven's game yesterday.

They were up against Easton University. Those two teams are considered rivals. This is the third year they've faced each other in the finals. Last season, Westmore swept the finals series, but both matches went to five sets, and the scores were close.

I got a little nervous while watching them.

I thought, are they really the ones I'll be up against in college? Did I make the right choice? Will my arm break if I try to dig their spikes?

These two schools are just so intense. They're almost equal in every skill set. It all comes down to breaks in the game and errors.

They're so evenly matched that Easton won round 1 of the elimination round, but Westmore came back in round 2. And guess what? Both matches went to five sets. It's not surprising anymore. I'd be more shocked if their matches ended in straight sets.

I guess the only difference between the two schools is that Easton's players are more aggressive, while Westmore's are more chill.

And it seems Easton used that to their advantage in yesterday's game. Westmore's players might have been affected by the swagger of their opponents, especially with Easton's fans booing whenever number eleven served.

I don't like that, but as they say, it's part of the game.

But, isn't it possible to cheer for your school without booing the opponent?

My phone buzzed with a notification. When I checked, number eleven had replied.

roenalejo11: We will. Thank you.

I didn't know how to respond, so I didn't reply. I didn't want him to think I was being too friendly. But less than five minutes later, my phone buzzed again.

roenalejo11: You're still in Baguio?

kaireyes: Yep.

roenalejo11: When are you coming back to Manila?

kaireyes: Maybe next week?

roenalejo11: You're not sure?

kaireyes: I mean, I'm not sure yet, hehe. I want to make the most of my time here since I don't get to come home often. I'll probably be back before enrollment.

roenalejo11: I see.

What do you even say to that? I just put my phone down again. When I looked up, I saw Mom staring at me with a smile, like she knew something I didn't.

"Who are you chatting with? Your girlfriend?" she teased.

"No," I replied quickly before her thoughts could go any further. "I don't have a girlfriend, Mom."

"Oh, that's fine. You're a grown man now, Kai. Just remember to always be responsible—"

"Mom," I cut her off. "That's not on my mind right now. I don't have time for that."

Mom just shook her head at me, so I shook mine back. Just then, my phone buzzed again. Mom laughed, so I thanked her for the food and went back to my room. I'll wash the dishes later. My mom really has a wild imagination.

roenalejo11: I was going to invite you to watch game 2. I have tickets.

kaireyes: That's too bad. But I'll still watch. Just on TV, hehe.
Good luck in game 2! Go all out in game 3 too!

roenalejo11: Thank you, Kaizen.

Kaizen, huh.

How did he know—

Oh, right. It’s on my profile.

Wow. He called me Kaizen, while I’ve been calling him number eleven. I know his name, Roen Alejo, but I got used to it. It’s Coach’s fault—that’s what he calls the opposing players, and I just followed suit.

Three days passed, and I was starting to feel restless. Time really moves slowly here. I don’t know about other places, but it feels like time drags on here. I’ve already exercised and everything, and it’s still morning!"

"Fortunately, the day of the finals game 2 finally arrived. I turned on the TV just as the pre-game was starting. This time, I made sure I wouldn't doze off. I made some iced coffee. My mom also watched with me, so I had someone to talk to.

It wasn't long before the starters from both schools were being called. It's strange, but I was nervous. I was even more anxious than the actual players, even though I'm not the one playing!

I hope Westmore wins so there will be a game 3.

"You have the same jersey number, dear," my mom said as she pointed to the screen showing number eleven.

She looked serious right away. It made me wonder if my face looks okay when it's in front of the camera. Number eleven has flawless skin, like a rich kid.

The referee went to the court for the first serve. Westmore's setter was the server, so they had a full front line right away. That was a good strategy to have three spikers in front. The arena got even louder when Westmore scored a service ace. Nice one!

The game continued, and I could hardly sit still in my seat. It was so intense! The match was thrilling! It was full of long rallies. Both teams really worked hard for every point. The Easton players tried to provoke number eleven again, but it didn't seem to work.

The intensity of the crowd was also remarkable. The arena was packed. I regretted falling asleep during the first game.

And now I understand why number eleven is famous. He's really amazing. He's surely going to secure a spot on the national team!

I can't believe I'm chatting with him on IG. It makes me want to ask for an autograph and then sell it. I could probably earn a lot from it.

"Roen Alejo serving for the match!"

The crowd erupted in cheers again. Almost everyone was on their feet, especially Westmore's supporters. It's the 5th set. The score is 14-11. One more point and there will be a do-or-die game over the weekend.

But before number eleven could serve, the camera shifted to a woman in the audience. She was beautiful, especially when she smiled. The crowd cheered. They cheered even louder when the focus returned to number eleven, who was also looking up at the screen.

"Maybe that's his girlfriend," I heard my mom say.

Now I get it.

"Oh..." I said, my eyes glued to the TV. "That's why they were cheering."

The referee blew the whistle. Number eleven did a jump serve. The whole arena erupted when he scored a service ace. Number eleven even became the Player of the Game. Well-deserved!

kaireyes: Congrats POG! Good luck in game 3!"

04

"Kai, son, remember to come back to Manila, okay?"

"Yes, Mom. I'll go first," I replied, then I blessed myself and kissed my mom on the cheek. "Auntie, please take care of yourself and Mom here," I said as I also blessed my Aunt Melba, who is Mom's younger sister.

This aunt of mine actually lives with us, but she's been gone for almost a month because she went up the mountain. Yep, literally up the mountain, together with her friends, all of whom are also single with no spouses or kids. She left when I came home, and she just got back yesterday.

Aunt Melba is such a cool aunt, you know? That's how I want to be when I get older—free-spirited like her—but I'm an only child. I do have nephews and nieces from my cousins, but it would've been better if I had siblings of my own.

I don't know what Mom and Dad were thinking. They didn't give me any siblings.

"Where are you headed, hijo?" someone asked me when I arrived at the bus terminal.

"Cubao," I answered.

They pointed me to the bus heading to Cubao, so I quickly boarded. I was only carrying a large backpack, which I placed on my lap and hugged. The gifts I brought for my teammates were stored in the overhead compartment.

Actually, I wasn't supposed to return to Manila yet. I was planning to come back next week, but I decided to watch Game 3 of the finals live instead.

The game is this afternoon, so I left early this morning. I thought it would be better to watch it live since both Game 1 and Game 2 were intense. Luckily, Jerome managed to get me an extra ticket.

I'm already excited.

It's really different when you're part of the audience and not the one playing.

"Welcome back, Kai!" My roommate, Jerome, greeted me with a hug as soon as I safely arrived at the dorm.

"Did you bring souvenirs?"

"The strawberry jam is free, but you have to pay for the jacket," I replied, handing over the box of stuff I bought.

"I thought everything was free! You can just pay for the ticket later during the game."

"The jacket comes with a freebie," I said. "There's a free soul attached to it—the last person who wore it."

"You idiot!" Jerome almost smacked me. We laughed because he's so easy to scare.

"What about the barrel man I asked you to buy, Kai? Did you bring it?" Vince, our opposite spiker, teased while still laughing.

"Fool. What are you going to do with that?"

"I'll check whose is bigger—"

"You pervert!" Jerome interrupted, then they started wrestling.

I ignored them and quickly unpacked my things. Afterward, I decided to take a nap to save energy for the game later. Jerome and another guy tried to convince me to go out, but I declined because I was still sleepy—I woke up too early. Plus, I can never sleep while traveling.

Before closing my eyes, I texted Mom to let her know I arrived safely. Then I scrolled through my dusty social media accounts until I ended up on Instagram.

I was watching IG stories from the rabbit accounts I follow until I saw number eleven reposting a story. It was a picture of him preparing to serve.

When I checked, the beautiful woman the camera was focused on during the last game was the one who posted the story. Number eleven's girlfriend.

So this is his type? A morena…

I scrolled a bit more until my phone fell on my face. I didn't even realize how long I slept. I was suddenly woken up by Jerome shaking me. He told me to take a shower because we were heading to the arena for the game.

"Is that what you're wearing?" Jerome asked after I got dressed.

I looked down at my outfit: a plain t-shirt, cargo pants, and white sneakers.

"What? Is it ugly?"

"No, but dark blue?"

I frowned. "What's wrong with dark blue?"

"Dark blue is Westmore's color, right? The Easton fans might surround you outside later if you wear that."

At first, I didn't understand what Jerome meant. But when I realized, he was right. People might think I'm cheering for Westmore. But honestly, I really wanted Westmore to win.

To play it safe, I changed into a white t-shirt.

"Okay now?" I asked him. He gave me a thumbs-up. "You're glowing, Kai. You're already wearing white, and now you're shining even more."

I just shook my head. Almost everyone I'm with is wearing black, so I avoided wearing black too. Otherwise, we'd look like a dance troupe.

When we arrived at the arena, I was overwhelmed by the number of people lining up. Wow. That's when I truly realized how big of a deal the collegiate volleyball finals really are here in the Philippines. And it's men's volleyball, too! Usually, crowds like this only gather for women's games, so it's amazing to see the reach of men's volleyball growing. Incredible! I hope it continues.

A few people asked to take pictures with us while we were in line. Some even asked John, one of our open spikers, for autographs. He was a bit shy, and Jerome teasing him made him even more embarrassed. Those guys are really something.

Once inside, we headed straight to our seats. We were in the lower box, so we were pretty close to the court. I was even more amazed as the entire arena slowly filled up with people.

"Good thing you changed your t-shirt. We're surrounded by Eastonians," Jerome whispered.

I looked around, and he was right. Everyone around us was wearing green. It was a bit intimidating because they were already in game mode.
Oh no. Looks like I won't be able to cheer loudly when Westmore scores, huh?

"Who do you think will win, Kai?" Kiko asked.

"Hmm, it depends on who makes fewer errors," I replied.

"That's not allowed, Kai!" Vince chimed in. "Pick one team. Join our bet. It's just twenty pesos each. I'm betting on Easton so Westmore doesn't get a three-peat."

"I'm with Easton too," Kiko added. "Let's have a new champion."

"Westmore," John said, surprising me because I didn't expect him to join the betting.

"Of course, Westmore!" Jerome declared. "Easton is stupid for letting it go to Game 3. Momentum is on Westmore's side. Number eleven is going to go beast mode."

"Uh, I'm with Westmore too," I said, and they forced me to hand over twenty pesos.

For a moment, my companions went silent, busy with their phones. I did the same and went straight to Instagram to message number eleven.

kaireyes: Good luck! I bet on you guys hehe.

I attached a picture of the court.
I didn't expect him to reply, but I was surprised when he read my message immediately. Number eleven was online!

roenalejo11: You're here inside the arena?

kaireyes: Yep hehe. We're on Easton's side.

roenalejo11: Oh.

kaireyes: But my twenty pesos are on you guys. Go Westmore!

roenalejo11: Haha thank you, Kaizen.

I didn't reply further, figuring he might be talking to his coach in the dugout. I'm sure they're getting a lot of reminders since it's Game 3 of the finals. Whoever wins this game becomes the champion. There's no tomorrow, so expect both teams to go all out.

But what does it feel like to be in the finals, huh?

I should manifest that! Maybe we'll make it to the finals next year! I daydreamed about holding the championship trophy when I felt my phone vibrate. When I checked, number eleven messaged me again!

roenalejo11: By the way, do you have plans on Sunday?

kaireyes: Nothing much. Why?

He took a while to reply.

roenalejo11: Let's have lunch or dinner. My treat.

I, on the other hand, took a while to respond. Honestly, I didn't know what to say. Why was he inviting me to eat? What's… going on?

roenalejo11: I'm still guilty about what happened during the semifinals.

Semifinals? What happened during the semifinals?

Ah… he hit me in the face with the ball.

I thought it was something serious. This number eleven is making me nervous. But he still feels guilty about that? It happened so long ago. Yeah, my face went numb for a few days, but I was fine. I've already forgotten about it. Especially since I only realized later that I got facial-hit live on national TV!

The whole of the Philippines saw me kissing the ball lips-to-lips!

And now this number eleven guy reminded me of it.

But wait. So this is how he is when he accidentally hits someone in the face? He treats them to food?
How many people has he treated to food after hitting them in the face?
Should I still act surprised? It's free food!

kaireyes: I won't say no to free stuff hehe.

He didn't read my message anymore. He probably went offline. When I looked back at the court, I confirmed it. Both teams' players were warming up.

I immediately spotted number eleven.

I was surprised when I realized he was already looking at me.

Wait, is he really looking at me?

He smiled. No teeth showing. Even though I wasn't sure if he was looking at me, I smiled back. I mimicked him. No teeth showing either. Then I saw him shake his head slightly before running back to his teammates.

05

Westmore University won the championship series.

And what else could you expect from their match against Easton? Five sets with incredibly close scores! It was insane. The intensity was so high that almost everyone in the arena was on their feet. The fans definitely got their money's worth because they witnessed top-quality volleyball.

And when Westmore finally won, I couldn't help but scream. I didn't even bother looking at the Easton supporters seated next to us.

The winning point was a block by number eleven against Easton's go-to spiker. His timing on that block was just incredible. Honestly, throughout the entire game, they couldn't seem to stop Easton's number seven, so it was extremely satisfying that it was precisely that block that sealed their victory.

That's also when I found out that number eleven was named both Best Open Spiker and MVP! Well-deserved, of course, because he's really talented.

So it's totally fine that I'm treating him to food.

A three-peat champion and MVP too! What an idol!

kaireyes: Congratulations, MVP Champ! 🥳🏆

After I sent that message, I tucked my phone away and joined Jerome and the others. We're now at an unlimited chicken wings restaurant just outside the arena. They insisted on eating first before heading home because they said they were tired from the game, even though they weren't the ones who played.

"I hope we make it to the finals next year, right?" Jerome said.

"If only Vince could stop making errors, we'd make it to the finals," Kiko joked, and we all laughed. It's true, though. It seems like Vince can't go a day without making some kind of error, whether it's during an attack or while serving.

"Idiot! Am I really that error-prone?" Vince asked, and we all just nodded in unison.

"The passes from Kai were perfect, Jerome's sets were spot-on, and your hit wasn't over? What kind of nonsense is that?"

"And you're always late to wake up," John chimed in, who's usually quiet.

"Hey! Why are you all ganging up on me—"

"Hep! Hep! Before you start regretting things, where's the bet money? Westmore won! Where's the twenty pesos from both of you?" Jerome said, turning to Kiko and Vince.

"Wow! Just for twenty pesos, you guys are acting like this!"

"A bet is a bet! Pay up already! Hurry up."

Even as we headed back to the dorm, the argument about the bet wasn't over yet. I just left them to it and went ahead to take a shower so I could sleep early. We had plans to go jogging tomorrow morning, though I doubted it would actually happen.

After getting dressed, I went straight to bed. I was about to close my eyes, but sleep still hadn't come. So here I am, scrolling through social media again.

The first thing I saw were posts about Westmore's championship win. I even came across a picture of number eleven lifting their coach while holding the trophy. I reacted to it and scrolled a bit more until I landed on Instagram.

Turns out, you can see people's posts even if you don't follow them, right? I noticed a lot of posts from Westmore players. Of course, all of them were about becoming three-peat champions, which they truly deserved.

They're all amazing. Their team has no weak spots.

Actually, all the teams deserve to win. But at the end of the day, there can only be one champion.

And that's the goal we should aim for next season. We've already made it back to the Final Four. Now, we need to try to return to the finals. And if luck is on our side, Creston University will win the championship again. It's been such a long time since the last one—15 years already.

I was about to put my phone aside when I noticed that number eleven had posted a new story. When I checked, it was a 15-second video of what looked like their victory dinner at a restaurant. Everyone was wearing dark blue championship shirts.

Their championship shirt looks so cool! I wonder where I can buy one? Wait, can I even buy one even though I'm from a different school?

Or maybe I should manifest having my own championship shirt instead?
We'll get one too someday!

Hopefully before I graduate, right?

I tried daydreaming that confetti was raining down in the arena while we were jumping around in joy because Creston had become champions again. But my fantasy was interrupted when I saw that number eleven messaged me.

roenalejo11: Thank you, Kaizen ☺

There's that emoji again—I still can't tell if he's angry or just suppressing his anger.

kaireyes: You guys were amazing earlier. Especially you. MVP!

roenalejo11: It's a total team effort, but thank you.

kaireyes: Stop being so humble! Haha!

roenalejo11: No, I'm not. Teamwork is the key to success when it comes to volleyball.

kaireyes: You're absolutely right about that. But wait, aren't you at your team's victory party? I saw it on your story.

roenalejo11: Yes. Are you home already?

I laughed. This guy sounds so proper. I was about to reply when suddenly Jerome's head popped out from the side. My phone nearly fell on my face from the shock! Seriously, what's with this guy!

"Who are you chatting with, huh?"

I quickly turned my phone away. "No one. Go to sleep already."

"Is this your girlfriend? Do you have a girlfriend now, Kai?" He teased.

I just scowled and pulled the blanket over my head. Jerome can be such a nuisance sometimes, especially when he wants to annoy me.

"Hey, Kai! You're not allowed to have a girlfriend yet! You're still a baby! What, is the youngest member of the team getting a partner before you? Coach is going to kill you for still being single!"

"Shut up! Just go to bed!"

"Who is it, huh? Did you leave a girlfriend behind in Baguio?"

"I didn't leave anyone. But I did bring back a ghost in the jacket you told me to buy."

Jerome froze for a moment, then threw a pillow at me. "You idiot!"

I laughed. He's so easy to scare.

Thankfully, Jerome finally left me alone, so I went back to my chat with number eleven.

kaireyes: I've been home since earlier.

But he didn't read it anymore. He must've gone offline. Well, he's probably busy with their victory party. I went offline too and fell asleep.

The following days didn't have much going on. In the mornings, I'd go jogging and work out with the team. It's better this way to keep our bodies in condition, especially since we're about to return to training soon.

I'm already excited for the off-season tournament! Hopefully, we'll make it to the podium finish. I also hope Westmore and Easton don't join. They're already too good. Let it be our turn.

But before that, I'm back to student mode again.
Enrollment is next week! Thank you so much, Lord, for letting me pass all my subjects last semester.

roenalejo11: Hey.

I quickly lowered my iced coffee to avoid spilling it on my phone. It was Saturday, and we—me and Jerome—were at a coffee shop near the school. Our team manager treated us.

kaireyes: Hey.

roenalejo11: See you tomorrow.

kaireyes: Tomorrow? What's happening tomorrow?

It took number eleven a while to reply. Tomorrow's Sunday… what's happening tomorrow?

roenalejo11: We're having lunch, right?

Lunch, huh…

Ah! Right! I completely forgot that he said he'd treat me to lunch. But is that really happening? I thought he just said it out of guilt because he hit me in the face with the ball during the semifinals. Like those people who invite you to eat just to be polite.

kaireyes: Is that really happening? I thought you were joking.

roenalejo11: No. I'm serious.

kaireyes: But it's okay if you don't treat me. I'd feel bad. Thanks, though!

What happened to "I won't say no to free stuff," Kai? But seriously! We're not even close enough friends for me to take advantage of his guilt. That incident was ages ago. My nose has already healed, and most importantly, I didn't end up brain-damaged.

roenalejo11: I insist.

This MVP is persistent!

kaireyes: Are you sure?

roenalejo11: Yeah.

kaireyes: You're the one saying this, okay?

roenalejo11: Yeah. So, lunch or dinner?

kaireyes: Lunch, if that's okay with you.

roenalejo11: Lunch it is.

kaireyes: But can I choose where?

roenalejo11: Anything's fine with me. Where do you want to eat?

Number eleven switched to Tagalog! That surprised me. But then I thought, how shameless of me to pick the place when he's the one treating me! He might think I'm being presumptuous. Now I feel even more embarrassed.

kaireyes: Oh, never mind. You decide. You're the one treating me, after all. Hehe.

roenalejo11: No. It's fine, really.

kaireyes: Are you sure?

roenalejo11: Yeah. Where do you want to eat?

kaireyes: Thailand.

I laughed after sending that. Of course, I was joking about Thailand. I let number eleven choose where we'd eat, but I secretly hoped it would be somewhere affordable. I'm fine with street food, honestly.

But then, I almost choked on my drink when I saw his reply.

roenalejo11: Alright. Do you have your passport with you? I'll book our flight now.

“Are you okay, Kai?” Jerome handed me a tissue, but I ignored him for a moment.

I quickly replied to number eleven, saying it was just a joke. This MVP guy is serious! Turns out, you can’t joke around with him!

06

"Where are we going, Kai?"

I turned to see Jerome now in the lobby of our dorm. He was eating his favorite popsicle. Seriously… I should've hurried up with my shower earlier. Now I've run into him here. He's definitely going to tease me.

"Just buying something," I lied.

"What? What are you buying that you're all dressed up for?"

"Is this even considered dressing up?"

I glanced down at what I was wearing: a plain black t-shirt, khaki cargo shorts, and white Crocs. I actually put some thought into this outfit—it's what I chose to look chill for tonight. I was just planning to have a quick dinner anyway.

When I looked back at Jerome, I didn't notice that he had already moved closer to me. Instinctively, I stepped back, especially when he suddenly sniffed me. Is he a dog or something?

"You smell so good! You don't usually wear cologne when you're just buying something," he said with that annoying smirk of his.
That smirk of his is infuriating. It's like he knows something I don't, but honestly, I don't know anything. I'm already regretting taking so much time picking out my clothes earlier.

"Are you meeting someone, huh?"

"No—"

"Who? Your girlfriend from Baguio? Is she here in Manila?"

"No—"

"Does Coach know about this, Kai? Oh no! But don't worry, it'll be our little secret," he said, pretending to zip his mouth shut. So annoying!

"Not really—"

I froze when he suddenly acted shocked, covering his mouth as if he'd just realized something.

"Don't tell me you're meeting another girl, Kai? Are you two-timing someone? You idiot—"

"No! I'm not meeting any girl! Stop bugging me!"

"So you're meeting a guy?" He acted even more shocked, looking like an idiot.

"I don't know what's wrong with you! Just leave me alone! Go take a bath! You stink!"

"Do you want me to come with you—"

"No!" I quickly walked away from Jerome. That guy can be such an idiot sometimes, especially when he's feeling playful.

"Come home early, Kai, okay? We have curfew! And buy me something too! Thank you! Love you!"

I ignored him. Even the building guard was giving him side-eye. Thankfully, he was alone today. If the others were with him, I wouldn't know what to do.

As soon as I left the compound, I headed straight to the jeepney stop to go to Westmore University. After paying the fare, I took out my phone to check the time. It was already 6:32 PM, and our meeting was set for 7 PM.

Speaking of number eleven, he sent me a DM.

roenalejo11: I'm already here.

This MVP is such a show-off! But isn't he early? It's only been 10 minutes since he sent that message. But then again, he shouldn't be late since their dorm is close to the university.

kaireyes: I'm on the jeep now. Just wait, okay? The driver stopped to refuel.

roenalejo11: It's fine. Take care.

I didn't reply anymore. I tucked my phone away because, knowing Manila roads, there's a high chance it could get snatched.

Speaking of my phone, I stayed up late last night chatting with number eleven. How could I have expected him to take my Thailand joke seriously? One of my dream destinations is Thailand, but I wouldn't go so far as to make him treat me to a trip there. That would be way too shameless of me, right? Honestly, I already felt bad enough for letting him choose where to eat.

If I were the type to take advantage of people, I'd probably be eating authentic pad thai right now.

MVP should really be thankful that I'm nice.

Hehe.

But seriously, his power of persuasion is insane! It made me think—does he really feel that guilty about hitting me in the face with the ball that he's willing to treat me to lunch? And in another country, no less! Good thing my passport is in Baguio, or else…

Just kidding! Of course, I wouldn't agree to that.

So instead of Thailand, we settled on a Thai restaurant near Westmore.

We should've just gone to a fast-food place—it's cheaper. I didn't want to take advantage of his guilt. Plus, he's also just a student like me.

And since I stayed up late last night (I didn't realize how long we'd been chatting), I asked if we could make it dinner instead. He said it was fine with him.

So here I am, on my way.

"Stop here," I said as we passed by the main building of Westmore University.

After getting off, I waited for the signal before crossing toward the waiting shed where I was supposed to meet number eleven. Luckily, I was wearing my glasses, so I spotted him right away.

And… suddenly, I wanted to go home.

Damn, MVP!

My Crocs suddenly felt so out of place.

Why is that? He’s just wearing a simple black polo shirt, jeans, and white sneakers, but why… why does he look so put-together? I didn’t expect him to look like this without his jersey on.

He has such a strong presence! People around him couldn’t help but stare. There were even two girls who couldn’t resist and took pictures of him. He’s really famous!

I felt even more self-conscious.

I kind of wanted to go back to the dorm and change my clothes.

Jerome was wrong. Me, dressed up? Then what do you call number eleven? Overdressed?

The light turned green, signaling it was safe to cross. And… I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt nervous. This wasn’t happening earlier, right? What’s wrong with me, Kaizen? Chill out. What’s gotten into you? Calm down.

I was probably just a few feet away from number eleven when he noticed me. He straightened up and gave me a small wave. I smiled at him and quickened my pace.

And then... I felt small. Literally small!

What was his height again? 6'3", right?

I used to feel tall at 5'8". But now, looking up at him, I felt like my parents' genes had only managed to make me 4 feet tall.

I wanted to go home.

Number eleven is really intimidating in real life.

"Hi," I greeted him, pretending to be cool even though I was completely overwhelmed by him.

Okay, Kaizen! Just think of it like you're talking to him in DMs.

He blinked, and I noticed his lips were slightly parted.

"Hey," he greeted back after a few seconds. His voice was deep. It suited him because he was such a big guy.

"You're so tall," I couldn't help but comment.

His lips parted again, and he laughed.

"Genes," he replied simply.

"Me too. Genes. This is all my genes could do."

He laughed. "You're actually tall. I'm just... taller?"

"You're not just taller. You're probably the tallest. What's your secret? Margarine?"

"Huh?" I laughed at the look on his face. Confirmed. Number eleven is definitely a rich kid. He doesn't know about the margarine thing. He probably ate butter as a kid. The unsalted kind.

Number eleven's forehead was furrowed as he kept looking at me.

I stopped laughing. He might get annoyed and realize why I was laughing at him, and we're not even close. Then he might decide not to treat me anymore.

But I still brought my wallet just in case. Better safe than sorry.

"So... shall we go?" I said when he still didn't say anything.

He nodded, but his forehead was still furrowed. He was probably still thinking about the connection between margarine and growing tall.

07

We arrived at the Thai restaurant, and number eleven was unusually quiet. The five-minute walk we took was mostly silent—he didn't say much. I don't know why, but I felt like he was tense. Was he nervous?

Even after we finished ordering, he just kept glancing at me. There were moments when I caught him with his mouth slightly open, as if he wanted to say something, but when I asked, he said nothing. Oh no, this isn't good… I'm already feeling a bit nervous, and now he's nervous too? Why is he even nervous in the first place? He's the one who invited me out for this treat! Seriously, this MVP guy…

Only one of us should be tense.

So fine, I'll adjust to make things less awkward. I also feel like he's naturally quiet in real life, based on how he answers interviews whenever he's named Player of the Game.

Alright, Kai, pretend you're interviewing MVP.

"Congratulations again, Mr. Champion MVP," I started while we waited for our food to arrive.
I only ordered pad thai, by the way, so he wouldn't spend too much. But he also ordered mango sticky rice, which I didn't refuse.

He looked at me and smiled—a closed-mouth smile. "Thank you, Kaizen."

I froze for a moment. Aside from my parents, he's the only one who calls me that. My friends and teammates usually just call me Kai. Hmm, it feels a bit weird hearing it outside of DMs.

But not in a bad way, though.

A good kind of weird. Does that even exist? Ah, whatever.

"And thank you for treating me," I said. "You really didn't have to, though. My face is fine. I didn't end up brain-damaged."

"But still, I'm sorry again for what happened."

"It's fine, don't worry about it. It didn't hit me that hard. Besides, you're treating me, so it's all good."

Number eleven finally smiled, this time showing his teeth. Wow. His teeth are so perfect—straight and white. He must be the type who visits the dentist twice a year religiously.

"Next year, I'll be the one treating you when our team becomes champions," I teased him confidently.

He laughed. "Noted."

"Wow! The way you said 'noted' makes it sound like you're sure we won't win, huh?"

"What? I'm just making a mental note."

I shook my head at him. "Delete that mental note of yours. What if you don't play your best when we face each other? I want to win fair and square."

He nodded slowly, still smiling. "Yeah. I agree."

"But seriously, what's your secret? Why is everyone at Westmore so good?"

"Hard work and discipline?" His voice sounded innocent, almost teasing. I wasn't sure if I should take offense. "So, are you saying we lack hard work and discipline?"

"No, that's not what I mean. What I'm saying is, we apply what we do in training to actual games. We listen to our coaches' instructions. We create strategies and game plans that work against our opponents."

I leaned back, watching him explain everything in serious mode. MVP was in full-on professional mode.

"We do that too, but you guys are just on another level. Even Easton is like that. Every year, it feels like the bronze medal is the only thing other schools can fight for."

I laughed, and number eleven just shook his head. But it's true, though. If only they'd give other schools a chance, right? Still, it's a sign that we need to step up our game to match Westmore and Easton.

It's tough, but I know we'll bounce back next season.

I will bounce back. I want to make it to the finals. I want to face number eleven's team in the championship.

Manifesting finals and championship for Creston U!

"But let me ask you something—are you always like this?"

He furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you always treat people to food when you accidentally hit them in the face with the ball?"

"Uh… no."

"Really? How many people have you treated, then?"

He shook his head. "You're the only one I've ever facial-hit."

He switched to Tagalog! It sounds a bit conyo (pretentious), but he finally spoke Tagalog! But I was more surprised that I'm the only person he's ever hit in the face. That seems impossible. "Really? I don't believe you!"

"It's the truth."

"Now I kinda want you to facial-hit me all the time so I can get free food," I joked, but it seemed like number eleven didn't find it funny. He frowned.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said.

We locked eyes.

I didn't respond right away. Wait, what do you even say to that? This is one of those moments where I don't know how to reply to him, similar to our DM conversations. I don't know… The atmosphere suddenly became awkward.

"What are you saying?" I finally reacted. "Sometimes, facial hits can't be avoided during games. As long as you don't mean to do it, it's fine. And how would you even facial-hit me again if you always avoid hitting me with your spikes? Don't think I don't notice it when we play against each other."

His mouth opened slightly, and the frown disappeared. Thank goodness! It was so awkward earlier. But judging by his reaction now, MVP feels guilty. Gotcha!

"That’s because you’re too good on defense."

"R-really?" I blinked, surprised. He called my defense good! That’s a compliment coming from the MVP!

"Yeah…"

"Thank you… but still! You should challenge me more. I know avoiding strong hits is part of your strategy, but how will I become the Best Libero if I don’t get any challenging balls to return?"

Number eleven laughed. I, on the other hand, frowned. I was being serious! It’s just that he makes it seem so easy to pick up individual awards, like he’s just plucking fruits from a tree.

"You’re laughing, but you’ve already won so many awards. Why don’t you give some away?"

"I want to, but I’m not a libero."

"Fair enough…"

"But being a champion is so much better than having an individual award. What’s the point of being the best open spiker in the league if you don’t win the gold medal?"

I nodded. "You’re right about that. It’s like being the top student in almost all your subjects but not being the valedictorian."

After all, the championship is the main reason why we train almost every day. Individual awards are just bonuses. What matters is that you sleep as a champion.

Hopefully, we’ll achieve that next season.

Our food arrived. Number eleven and I ordered the same thing. That’s when I realized how hungry I was when I saw the pad thai. And even more so when I tasted it. It was delicious! I’ll remember this restaurant for when I crave Thai food again—I’ll know exactly where to go.

Actually, I wanted to order more, but when number eleven asked if I wanted to, I declined. It felt embarrassing, you know? Instead, I focused on the mango sticky rice, which I also enjoyed because it wasn’t overly sweet.

While we were eating dessert, I asked number eleven random questions.

This was my chance, right? I’m a fan of his too, after all. I pretended to be a courtside reporter with the questions I asked him: What are his pre-game rituals? What’s his mindset before, during, and after a game? What does he eat before playing? How did he learn volleyball? Who’s his idol? What are his plans after college? He answered all of them.

That’s when I realized that he’s only serious when he’s on the court. I once read that people thought number eleven was snobbish, but now that I’ve spoken to him personally, he doesn’t seem like that at all.

He’s actually really kind.

He truly deserves all the achievements he has.

I also found out that he’s studying chemical engineering. Chemical engineering! That’s such a tough course, isn’t it? I can’t imagine how he balances studying and volleyball, but apparently, he manages. He says time management is key.

Wow. He’s smart, disciplined, and that’s why he’s MVP.

And to think that volleyball seems so effortless for him. Meanwhile, I often pray just to get through being a student-athlete every day.

When we were walking back to Westmore, number eleven started asking me questions. They were the same ones I asked him. I answered everything, though I was a bit distracted by our height difference.

He’s really tall.

And his build is huge.

I should work out tomorrow.

"Hey, thanks again for treating me," I said when we reached the waiting shed across from Westmore. I didn’t even notice how time flew. Curfew at the dorm is 10 PM, but our conversation ended up stretching longer than expected.

"You’re welcome," number eleven replied. "Next time, I’ll treat you. When we become champions."

He smiled. "I’m looking forward to it."

"But not in Thailand, okay? My budget only goes as far as Baguio."

He laughed. I laughed too, but I was serious. I’m not as rich as this MVP guy, you know.

"That’s my jeep," I said when I spotted it approaching. "Take care going back to your dorm, MVP. Thanks again."

I waved at him, but suddenly, he ruffled my hair.

We locked eyes. He was smiling while doing it.

"Take care too. Thank you for tonight, Kaizen."

08

The next few days flew by so quickly.
It's crazy, really. After enrollment, it felt like everything just passed by in the blink of an eye. We haven't even done much yet, right? Just conditioning and workouts, but time seems to be rushing. Before we knew it, there were only a few days left before we'd be back in full student mode.

Thankfully, Jerome requested a team-building activity so we could relax before the new school year started. Our team manager, who's always generous and makes sure we're well-fed and treated, covered all the expenses for our trip. All we had to contribute was our presence. The whole team was thrilled, of course.

We were promised another out-of-town trip if we win the off-season tournament. Anywhere we wanted! And my crazy teammates suggested Disneyland—not in Hong Kong, but Tokyo! I couldn't help but laugh at the look on our team manager's face. He got himself into quite the situation.

Speaking of free stuff, I've still been exchanging DMs with number eleven. Sometimes I'm surprised when he messages me—he usually just checks in or talks about random topics. Most of the time, though, it's volleyball-related. He even messaged me when I posted an IG story of the beach resort we visited during the team-building activity.

And speaking of team building, Westmore's sponsors are really something else. I saw on Instagram that number eleven and his team went to Paris to celebrate their championship.

But this MVP guy—can you believe it? He said Paris was boring and that he preferred the place we went to in La Union. I don't know what to make of him.

kaireyes: Are you joining the off-season tournament?

roenalejo11: Yes, but I'm not included in the lineup.

kaireyes: Nice! That's good so you won't get too tired.

roenalejo11: Haha, but I want to play though.

kaireyes: Don't! Let your team give us a break this off-season! Please suggest to your coach to send your Team B instead, haha.

That's all it took for number eleven to laugh at me.

But I really hope they only send their Team B. Off-season tournaments are meant for team chemistry building, especially when many players from the current lineup graduate. It's where adjustments are made so everything runs smoothly when the main season starts. Plus, it's a chance to see who makes it into the starting six.

But knowing Westmore, even their Team B will be strong. Their players are like flying androids when they hit the ball. Their sports program is just that good.

Still, I'm rooting for Creston.

roenalejo11: I'll watch your games if my schedule allows. Good luck, Kaizen.

kaireyes: MVP, you're putting pressure on me! But thank you!

roenalejo11: You should sleep now. Your classes start tomorrow, right?

kaireyes: Yep. Lucky you, yours starts next week. Good night!

roenalejo11: Good night.
See you in the games.

I fell asleep that night excited but nervous for the new school year ahead. I'm now a sophomore at Creston and on the team. I'm no longer a rookie, so I need to step up my game, especially for the next season. My motto as a libero should be:
No ball shall touch the ground.

As long as I can, I'll defend with everything I've got.

Another thing—no one on our team is graduating, unlike other schools, so that's our advantage. The team chemistry is already there. We just need to stay consistent.

Or… so I thought.

"Did you transfer to Easton?!" Jerome angrily asked John.

The whole team was gathered in their room in the dorm today. We were watching John pack his things. A week had passed since classes started, so we were all wondering why he hadn't been attending. Turns out, he didn't enroll at Creston.

Well, technically, he did enroll—just at Easton.

We were all shocked.

This decision came out of nowhere. He didn't even talk to us about it! We watched the finals together, ate out together, trained together, and now this?

"Sorry, guys," was all John could say. He didn't even look at us.

"You idiot! Why are you transferring? Why didn't you tell us? We thought the team was intact, especially since the off-season is coming up, and now we find out you're leaving? And to Easton of all places? If I hadn't pestered Coach, we wouldn't have known! Damn it!"

Jerome was furious. The rest of us were silent, especially Paul, John's best friend on the team.

"Cap, calm down," Vince said, patting Jerome on the back.

"No! Damn it! At least he could've told us! We're together almost every day, and he didn't even think to say anything?"

"I didn't really want to leave," John finally said, and we all turned to look at him. "My parents wanted me to transfer."

"Damn them," Paul suddenly muttered before standing up and leaving the room.

"Dude, I get that you want to transfer, but why Easton?" Kiko asked.

John didn't answer. Jerome cursed again and stormed out of the room. Kiko immediately signaled for the others to follow our captain. One by one, everyone left until only John and I remained. I walked over to him and patted him on the shoulder.

"Good luck at Easton," I said.

He gave me a sad smile. "Thanks, Kai."

"It's a shame you're no longer on the team. But it's fine—we can't do anything about what your parents want."

"Sorry again. I wanted to tell you guys, but…"

"Don't worry about it. Let Jerome cool off first, then you two can talk," I said, patting his shoulder again. "We'll still see each other, right? It's just that you'll be on the other side of the net. Don't play too hard against us when we face you, okay?"

He laughed and nodded. "Okay."

It's so sad. I didn't expect anyone to leave the team so suddenly. I thought we'd all stay together until they graduated. John is a year ahead of me—he's in the same batch as Jerome, Paul, and Kiko.

And to be honest, I'm already feeling regret about it now. John was one of the team's key players. He was strong and really good at his position. He was our go-to player. So now that he's no longer on the team, I don't know what adjustments Coach will make. The off-season tournament is coming up soon, too.

The news of John transferring to Easton spread quickly. And what's annoying is that there are so many rumors going around about the real reason he left Creston.

Some say he was offered a condo and a car. Others claim he failed his classes. There's even a rumor that he had issues with the team.

That's why I try not to spend too much time on social media—it's crazy how people think and jump to conclusions!

roenalejo11: Hey. I heard the news.

kaireyes: Has it reached you guys too?

roenalejo11: It's all over social media. How's the team?

kaireyes: We're adjusting and moving on, haha. The off-season is coming up soon, after all.

After a few weeks, we started training again. And I have to admit, the whole team is still affected by John's departure. Our coaches have scolded us several times because we couldn't execute our plays properly, especially Drew, who replaced John. You can see the pressure on him because he was immediately given such a huge responsibility. Everyone's been supporting him as much as possible. Add to that the stress of our subjects—especially the minor ones that feel like major headaches.

So even though midterms are still far away, I've already been praying hard. I hope I pass all my subjects this semester because apparently, hell week will coincide with the opening of the tournament.

I've also been praying that I make it through the second semester without getting sick. I've been praying for the whole team and even Coach.

But it seems like my prayers are being answered late.

I thought things were finally smoothing out for the team, but I guess not.

"Damn you! Is it true you haven't been attending your classes?!"

Jerome was furious again. He was so angry that the whole team had to hold him back. This time, it was because of another teammate of mine, Roy, one of our liberos.

"Captain, calm down! This could reach Coach!"

"How can I calm down when this idiotic teammate of yours isn't going to class?!"

Roy just kept his head down. Like John, he's one of the quieter members of the team. He's two years ahead of me, and he was the main libero before I joined. Honestly, I never expected him to have this kind of issue because he seemed fine during training.

"You're prioritizing seeing your girlfriend—"

"It's none of your business!"

When Jerome heard that, he almost broke free from our hold. But even we were shocked when Roy suddenly shouted. "What did you say?! None of your business?! Are you an idiot? Of course, we care if you have a girlfriend, but you need to attend your classes! If you fail, you won't be able to play this season! The whole team will suffer because of your nonsense! You know that!"

"I'm done! I'm not playing anymore! I'm not going to class either! What's the point of training if I'm just warming the bench? I don't even get any playing time!"

"So that's your problem? You're not getting enough playing time? If you improved during training—"

Jerome didn't get to finish what he was saying because Roy suddenly lunged at him. Things escalated quickly, and soon everyone was in chaos. After a while, one of our coaches arrived to break them up.

As for me? I left.

I needed some fresh air because the stress of the past few days has been overwhelming.

Next thing I knew, I found myself inside a convenience store near Westmore University. I don't even remember how I got there—I just realized I had already hopped on a jeep earlier.

I bought a bottle of water and sat down for a bit.

I started thinking about everything.

I almost jumped in surprise when something cold suddenly touched my cheek. When I turned around, I saw number eleven standing there. I stood up, my eyes wide as I looked up at him.

"Hey," I greeted him.

Number eleven smiled—that signature closed-mouth smile of his. Then he raised his hand holding—

"Ice cream?"

09

"Ice cream?"

I don’t know, but my brain didn’t process it right away. I think I blinked a few times in front of number eleven just to fully grasp that he was standing here in front of me now.

I looked at the cookies 'n cream flavored ice cream he was holding—the one he was offering me. He also had a chocolate-flavored one in his other hand. It seemed like he noticed me looking at the chocolate one because he offered that to me instead.

"Want the chocolate one?"

I panicked. Seriously, Kai. You’re even choosing flavors when you’re the one being given this.

"Uhm, no—"

"It’s fine. Here," he said as he took my hand and placed the ice cream in it himself.

"Uhm, t-thanks."

"You’re welcome."

I slowly sat back down. I thought number eleven would leave, but he asked if he could sit next to me. I nodded, even though I really wanted some time alone to think. But how could I tell him to leave after he gave me ice cream?

In front of us was the glass window of the convenience store, so I could somewhat see our reflections. That’s when I noticed we were the only customers there at that time. I glanced at my watch. It wasn’t too late at night, but there weren’t many people around.

I turned my gaze back in front of me and saw our reflections again.

He was busy unwrapping his ice cream. He was wearing a black hoodie and jersey shorts. He’s really tall. Being next to him makes you feel small—literally dwarfed.

Until our eyes met in the reflection. I quickly looked away. I guess I was caught staring at him for too long.

"Not in the mood for ice cream?" he smiled.

"Oh, yeah, right," I said, then started unwrapping mine.

"What brings you here, by the way?"

"Taking a breather," I replied, because that’s the truth.

"Taking a breather?"

"I mean, cooling off with some air conditioning?"

He laughed. I laughed too. "Look how far I’ve come, huh? Honestly, I don’t even know how I ended up here. I just realized I hopped on a jeep earlier."

Number eleven nodded along. He seemed to believe what I said, which was good because I wasn’t in the mood to explain anything further.

"I thought you came here to see me."

I looked at him again, this time turning fully toward him. I caught him giving me that signature closed-mouth smile of his. "Just kidding," he said when he saw me frown. "But I was actually about to message you before I saw you here."

"Ah…"

After that, number eleven didn't say anything more. Neither did I. We just quietly ate our ice creams.

I took a deep breath and bit into my ice cream. Thank goodness for the toothpaste I'm using now—I didn't get brain freeze. I prefer biting into my ice cream rather than licking it because I don't know how to do that technique properly.

And thankfully, number eleven bought chocolate-flavored ice cream—my favorite. Somehow, it lessened the stress I've been feeling about everything happening with the team lately. Sigh. Just when the tournament we're supposed to join is approaching, issues arise within the team.

Is this a sign?

A sign of what, Kai?

I don't want to think about it. Negative thoughts are forbidden, Kaizen! All those things I've been manifesting will go to waste!

I glanced at number eleven when I noticed he hadn't moved much beside me. He had already finished his ice cream and was now staring out the window of the convenience store.

I suddenly felt guilty. We were sitting next to each other, yet neither of us was talking. I wasn't making an effort to converse with him.

"Sorry," I said.

He turned to look at me. "Hmm?"

"Nothing. Am I being too quiet?"

"A little," he smiled.

"Sorry. I'm just not really in the mood. You know…"

"It's fine," he said. "But may I ask why? Is there a problem?"

"Well… yes. But it's not just my problem—it's actually a problem for the whole team."

"Is that why you're here?"

"Yeah," I answered. "I guess I can share this with you, right? It's not confidential or anything."

"No. It's fine. If you're not allowed to or if you're uncomfortable—"

"No! I'll tell you. But don't spread it around, okay?"

Number eleven seemed forced to nod. I laughed. He's such a big guy, but he looked like a kid trying to hold back their excitement over hearing some juicy gossip. Still, he seemed trustworthy. I doubt he'd go around spreading what he hears.

I told him what's been going on with the team. About John transferring. About our struggles during training. Of course, I didn't mention any specific strategies or plays—we still consider him an opponent since he's part of Westmore. I also told him about Roy skipping classes.

I feel like, even though Roy didn't directly say it to me, I might be the reason he lost his playing time.

There are only two liberos on the team—me and him.

But… I don't know. It's not really my fault, right? The coaching staff decides who gets playing time during games.

"I'm just following orders. If he has a problem with that, he can always talk to the coaches."

I went on and on telling my story, while number eleven just nodded and listened quietly. Which was fine with me—I didn't expect him to say much anyway.

Maybe I just wanted someone to listen who wouldn't be biased and would just hear me out.

"I hope you guys clear things up before the tournament," number eleven said during a brief pause after I finished talking.

"I hope so too. I don't want to think about it too much because our hell week is coming up soon," I sighed. "Sorry for ranting like that."

Number eleven smiled. "It's okay."

"Oh yeah, why are you here? Don't tell me you're here to cool off too? It's impossible that your dorm doesn't have air conditioning. Westmore is loaded!"

"I just came to buy ice cream, but then I saw you…" he shrugged.

"Wow! You spoke in Tagalog! Do that more often, please. That's where I'll dig my nose into, not your facial hit anymore."

Number eleven just laughed at me. He probably thought I was joking. But I was serious!

We hung around for a few more minutes until I decided to head back to the dorm. Number eleven and I left the store and started walking toward the jeepney stop. It was already late, and I didn't want to get caught by curfew. Hopefully, things were quieter in the dorm now. I really hate unnecessary drama when things could just be resolved through conversation.

"Thanks again for the ice cream," I said as we waited for the jeep. I told number eleven to go ahead since he'd done enough, but he insisted on accompanying me until I got on a ride. MVP is such a nice guy!

"You're welcome. Hope that helped lighten your stress, even just a little," he replied.

"Yeah, I'm good now. Thanks again. I thought we'd only see each other again during games."

Number eleven didn't answer right away.

"We could meet up sooner."

"Huh? What do you mean ‘we could’?"

He cleared his throat.

"We could meet up if you want."

I turned to look at number eleven. But when I did, I caught him staring straight ahead at the road, his hands tucked into the pockets of his hoodie.

What I noticed most, though, were his ears turning red.

"Anytime you want," he added.

He turned to look at me after saying that.

Our eyes met. My lips parted slightly. There was something… I can’t explain it. I was about to say something, but then the jeep arrived.

10

roenalejo11: Good luck on your game today, Kaizen.

kaireyes: Thank you, MVP! I'm nervous, haha!

roenalejo11: Breathe. You got this.

I smiled at number eleven's message. Wow, he's so supportive. But honestly, it made me feel even more pressured because one of the rising volleyball stars in the country is wishing me luck. It felt like I couldn't afford to make any mistakes during the game.

kaireyes: I've been inhaling and exhaling since earlier. I might accidentally inhale our captain soon, hahaha!

roenalejo11: Haha

This guy is really stingy with his laughs in DMs. But that's fine compared to his regular smile emoji. I still don't know if that's the only emoji on his phone—it's so creepy!

roenalejo11: Just enjoy the game, okay?

kaireyes: Yep! We've got this. By the way, are you watching?

roenalejo11: Unfortunately, I have classes today.

kaireyes: Oh, good! So you won't see me if I misreceive the ball.

roenalejo11: You rarely misreceive, though. You have excellent ball control.

I laughed and felt a bit embarrassed, even though number eleven wasn't physically there. Wow! He said my ball control is excellent! Coming from MVP Roen Alejo! It feels so good to hear—or rather, read—that. But it also made me feel even more pressured!

kaireyes: Thank you, but I don't have money to treat you.

roenalejo11: It's fine. I'll treat you when you win.

kaireyes: Really? I won't refuse.

roenalejo11: Yes. Also, make sure you don't get a facial hit.

I laughed again and shook my head. Seriously, number eleven! I was already trying to forget about that, and he reminded me!

"Coach, Kai's smiling while chatting!"

I looked up and saw all my teammates staring at me. I couldn't help but scowl. Especially at Jerome, who was laughing so hard at his own joke. Coach wasn't even in the dugout, but for some reason, I still felt nervous.

"Idiot, do you have a girlfriend now, Kai?" Vince teased.

"He does! He wouldn't be smiling like that if there wasn't someone making him happy."

They started teasing me and crowded around. I quickly hid my phone.

"Let us see, Kai!"

"Introduce her to us!"

"Yeah! What if she’s our classmate? Oh no!"

"Is she coming to watch? Tell her to cheer for us."

"I don’t have a girlfriend! Leave me alone!" I said as I shooed them away.

"You’re fooling yourselves with Jerome’s nonsense. That’s fake news! I just saw a funny meme."

But no matter how many times I told them I didn’t have a girlfriend, they wouldn’t stop teasing me. They’re so annoying! I’m definitely going to get back at Jerome later in the dorm. I’ll tell him I saw a white lady in the bathroom.

But honestly, I prefer this kind of chaos with my teammates. I don’t like how we were almost lifeless and silent because of everything that happened to the team.

Roy dropped out of Creston last week. He didn’t reconsider, even after Coach and the team manager talked to him. Of course, it’s sad whenever someone leaves, but unlike with John, my last conversation with Roy didn’t end well.

The news spread quickly, of course. And what else? More rumors started circulating.

Some say they know exactly what’s happening with our team.
Others claim there must be something wrong with our system.
Some even say Creston doesn’t know how to take care of their student-athletes.

It’s frustrating because they don’t know the full story.

Thankfully, Jerome has calmed down, and he’s the one reminding us not to read those kinds of things on social media. He told us to focus on the off-season tournament and the adjustments we need to make since we lost two players.

I’m also thankful for the coaching staff and Creston’s administration. They’ve never neglected us. They support whatever decisions we make, as long as we inform them properly.

So yeah, I’m fully behind Creston U. We’ll fight hard in this tournament. I’ll give it my all.

It’s just a bit challenging because I’m the lone libero now. Add to that, it’s hell week for us right now. I’ll admit, it’s a bit tough balancing training and reviewing for exams, but I’m managing. It’s all about time management and discipline.

And coffee. Lots and lots of iced coffee.

"And their starting libero, number eleven, Kaizen Reyes!"

I gave high-fives to my teammates and the coaches. Then I headed to the court for our mini huddle.

Our opponent today is Northville University. We beat them in both rounds last season, but we can’t underestimate them. Especially now that we’ve lost John, our ace spiker, and I heard their rookie opposite hitter is strong.

Plus, they brought a lot of supporters to the arena. Only a few of ours showed up since it's hell week at Creston.

"Guys, defense, okay?" Jerome said. "Kai, Drew, let's keep the ball moving, alright?"

"Yes, Captain!" Drew and I replied.

"If we can finish in three sets, let's do it. I have an exam tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Captain!"

"Creston!"

"U!"

And with that, the game began.

And we didn't expect Northville's rapid improvement. They took the first set! The score was 25-18. Wow… they've gotten faster. Their offense and defense were on point! It felt like we were facing a completely different team today. And it's true—their incoming rookie is really good. That's who I struggled with the most. I had a hard time reading him since this was the first time I'd seen him play.

"Guys, we're getting more first-ball passes than them, but we're lacking in attack. Spikers, use your techniques," Coach said before the start of the second set. "Vince, once their blockers are established, use their hands. Check it out. Drew, you've got a down-the-line shot. Don't always go crosscourt—you're too predictable to their libero. Avoid their libero, understood?"

"Yes, Coach!"

"Kai, try to bring your receive closer to Jerome, okay?"

I nodded. "Yes, Coach."

"Guys, just relax. You're all stiff out there. Communicate, okay? Let's take this second to fourth set."

"Yes, Coach!"

The buzzer sounded, so we returned to the court. This time, Northville was serving, so I got ready to receive. Thankfully, I didn't misreceive!

"Nice pass, Kai!"

"Kill it!" I shouted to Drew as Jerome set the ball to him.

And boom! The first point of the second set goes to Creston!

"Nice one!" We ruffled Drew's hair.

The game continued, and our movements became smoother. It started with Northville making consecutive shank passes, so they never gained momentum. Their spikers couldn't attack properly because of that, so I told the team to put more power into their serves.

And that became the story of the entire game, which resulted in us winning in four sets! Wow. First win of the tournament! What a great feeling! Jerome was named Player of the Game, and we messed up his hair while he was being interviewed by the courtside reporter.

Afterward, we returned to the dugout with the whole team buzzing with excitement. But once we were on the bus heading back to Creston, everyone quieted down as we remembered the midterm exams and requirements waiting for us.

Maybe I should nap for 30 minutes if I can?

roenalejo11: Good game. Congratulations, Kaizen.

I flopped onto my bed and replied to number eleven.

kaireyes: Thank you! Did you watch?

roenalejo11: I was able to watch sets 3 and 4.

kaireyes: Where did you watch? On illegal livestreams? Hahaha!

roenalejo11: Haha, yes. Shh.

kaireyes: So, you saw that I didn't get a facial hit, right? Not even in sets 1 and 2! I promise!

roenalejo11: Haha, yeah. Good job. Since you didn't get a facial hit, I'll send you food. Do you want anything?

kaireyes: Wait, you're serious about that?

roenalejo11: Yes.

kaireyes: I won't refuse then! An iced coffee would be nice, hehe. I still need to review, so I need the energy.

roenalejo11: Noted. Anything else?

kaireyes: That's all, hehe. Thank you again for the free stuff, MVP! You're the best!

roenalejo11: You're welcome.

Wow! MVP even asked "Anything else?" He's such a rich kid. This is already the third time he's treated me—first at the Thai restaurant, then the ice cream, and now iced coffee. Am I taking advantage of him? I really need to treat him sometime soon too! It's supposed to be give and take, right? I've been all take. I need to give back.

I went down to the lobby of the dorm when number eleven said the delivery rider was on the way. Thankfully, Jerome and the others were busy reviewing, so I was able to leave the room quietly.

Not even 15 minutes later, the delivery arrived. I was a bit surprised because the paper bag was huge. It wasn't just iced coffee—it also came with pasta and cheesecake! Oh no… this isn't good.

What if I get used to him treating me like this?

I really need to treat him as soon as possible!

kaireyes: I received it! Thank you! I only said iced coffee, but thank you so much for the food too, MVP! You're the best!

roenalejo11: You're welcome, Kai. Enjoy and rest well after you study.

I smiled. Suddenly, I felt motivated to study.

11

I don’t know whether to be happy or not about how fast the days are flying by.
Maybe it’s because I’ve been so busy lately? I just realized that hell week is already over, and we’ve played six games in the off-season tournament. That’s how fast it’s going!

I don’t know if I’m just ignoring all the exhaustion, which is why I don’t notice how time flies. Everything is happening one after another—schoolwork, training, and games. We don’t even have time to hang out as a team anymore. Even Jerome and I don’t get to talk about random things anymore because everyone’s scared of getting bad grades.

But it’s all worth it because our win-loss record right now is 6-0… so far!

Six wins and no losses at this point!
Of course, I’m happy! Think about it—we haven’t lost a single game, even though we lost our ace spiker and I don’t have a backup libero.

But still, we can’t celebrate yet because we haven’t faced Easton yet, and Westmore, like us, also hasn’t lost a game.

"Guys, we need to strengthen our block coverage. Easton’s middles are fast. Once their blocks are established, spikers, use their hands," said the assistant coach as we watched Easton’s games.

"Yes, Coach."

"And they’re heavy servers. We need a stable first ball. They’re really good at targeting with their serves." I nodded, but I was already nervous because Easton is our next opponent.

Speaking of Easton, it’s no surprise that they haven’t lost a game—they’re going all out with their lineup this season. It seems like they really want to bounce back from their silver finish last season.

And as for Westmore? They’re truly amazing. Right? They sent their Team B, and they’re still dominating. That’s how strong their sports program is and how competitive their players are—you really have to step up if you want to make it to Team A.

That’s why number eleven is just incredible—he’s not only part of Team A, but he’s also their best player.

Speaking of number eleven, I don’t know what to make of him. How is it possible that in all six of our wins, he’s treated me to food six times already?

I even checked myself in the mirror.

Do I look that thin to him?

I’m honestly surprised. I thought it was just for the first game, but MVP seems to have gotten into the habit! I almost got caught by Jerome and the others once, but thankfully, I managed to lie my way out of it. I just told them I ordered it myself.

I really need to treat him as soon as possible!

kaireyes: What’s your number?

roenalejo11: Why?

kaireyes: Just because.

roenalejo11: If you're thinking of paying me back for the food, then I won't give you my number.

kaireyes: It's not fair that every time we win, you treat me.

roenalejo11: That's because you deserve it.

kaireyes: You're sabotaging me, huh?

roenalejo11: What?

kaireyes: You're trying to make me gain weight so I can't chase the ball anymore.

I laughed when he didn't reply right away. I imagined him frowning while typing his response.

kaireyes: And doesn't your girlfriend get suspicious?

roenalejo11: Girlfriend?

kaireyes: What if she finds out you're sending food to someone? Do you tell her that you're treating me? What if she gets the wrong idea? You're in trouble.

roenalejo11: What are you talking about?

kaireyes: Hey, that's mean. You're denying you have a girlfriend.

roenalejo11: There's nothing to deny because I don't have a girlfriend.

I frowned. He doesn't have a girlfriend? Then who was that girl during the finals? People were going crazy over her!

kaireyes: Really?

roenalejo11: Where did you get the idea that I have a girlfriend, Kai?

kaireyes: Is there really none? Then who's Nica Guerrero?

roenalejo11: She's not my girlfriend.

I was confused. So she's really not his girlfriend? Wow. I thought number eleven already had a girlfriend. But he doesn't seem like the type to lie about something like that. Why would he even lie?

I went to Nica Guerrero's Instagram profile. Is this confirmation that she's not really his girlfriend? Because I didn't see a single picture of just the two of them looking sweet together. All I saw were group photos.

What do I know, though? I'm not the type to stalk other people's profiles unless I'm really curious—or Jerome forces me to.

Come to think of it, I haven't even looked at number eleven's profile.

roenalejo11: She's just a friend, Kai.

kaireyes: Sorry. I thought she was your girlfriend.

roenalejo11: Where did you get that idea?

kaireyes: I saw it during the finals. You were serving, and the camera panned to her, and the crowd went wild.

Isn't that how it usually works? I've noticed that cameramen sometimes know exactly when there's something going on between players and certain people in the audience. Sometimes, they even know the gossip better than we do. Maybe they're also lurking on social media?

I don't know.

roenalejo11: All this time, you thought I had a girlfriend?

kaireyes: Yeah, haha. But if you say you don't, I believe you. Sorry.

Number eleven didn't reply after that. He must've fallen asleep. MVP fell asleep on me!

"Guys, just enjoy the game, okay? Also, don't forget to communicate so you don't lose focus inside the court. Understood?" Coach said.

"Yes, Coach!"

"If you make a mistake, recover immediately, okay?"

"Copy, Coach!"

"Creston!"

"U!"

It's game day today. Here comes that familiar nervousness again, but this time it's doubled because Easton is our opponent.

It's the battle of the undefeated teams since both of us have the same win-loss record. Whoever loses today will suffer their first loss of the tournament, so I'm really nervous. I'm not sure about Jerome and the others, though—they're already in full-on game face mode. They've never liked Easton much because their players are kind of cocky, but things feel even more intense now because John is here. John, who isn't even part of their lineup, is here in the arena to watch.

"Creston's starting libero, number eleven, Kaizen Reyes!"

As I entered the court, we quickly huddled. Afterward, we took our positions. Easton would serve first, so I got ready to receive.

The referee hadn't blown the whistle yet, so I let myself glance around at the crowd.

Wow. There are so many people! Most of them are wearing green, Easton's supporters. Honestly, they've outnumbered our white-clad supporters. And I blinked in surprise when, amidst the sea of white shirts, I spotted number eleven wearing a red hoodie and a white baseball cap. He was holding a long white balloon, which he raised as our eyes met. Did he bring that with him? Or did he just grab it from someone cheering for Creston?

And there it was again—his signature smile, the one where his teeth don't show.

Shit… it's true! Number eleven is here!

I thought he couldn't watch the game? That's what he said in his message earlier! He tricked me, didn't he?

I only looked away from him when the referee blew the whistle for the first serve. I don’t know why, but my nervousness doubled. Oh no, this isn’t good.

Whenever I get too nervous, that’s when I make mistakes.

Calm down, Kaizen!

I took a deep breath and focused on Easton’s server. He did a jump serve, and I was his target!

"Kai!" I heard Jerome shout.

But… shit, misreceive!

I could only gape as I watched the ball fly straight into the audience.

12

We lost.

Straight sets.

And I almost got a facial hit too. It was so frustrating. Luckily, I managed to avoid the ball because it would've been embarrassing to lose and get hit in the face at the same time.

The whole team was silent on our way back to Creston. Only the coaches were talking, trying to cheer us up, but it didn't help. How could it? This was probably the worst loss we've had in the entire off-season.

Our scores didn't even reach 20. In the third set, we almost scored single digits! If Easton hadn't made a service error, our score wouldn't have even reached 10 points.

We knew Easton was strong, but we could've done better. Maybe we just got overwhelmed by the pressure and nerves that shouldn't have gotten to us.

And I don't think I'll ever forget that Easton's first point was because of a service ace directed at me.

At me, the libero!

I couldn't accept it.

It was so embarrassing. A libero misreceiving right at the start? At least I managed to recover somehow later on. I even wanted to ask Coach for a sub-out earlier, but who would've replaced me? I forgot I'm the only libero left on the team.

"Easton is really strong," Jerome sighed beside me.

"Yeah," I took a deep breath.

He laughed. "And John wasn't even playing yet. What more if he does?"

We both sighed again.

"At least let's focus on making it to the semifinals," I said. "We can do that, Captain. Think positive."

"Our team made so many errors today," he leaned back and closed his eyes. "It felt like we were dying out there every time we made a mistake. That's what we need to work on."

I nodded because he was right. I also felt guilty about my own performance. That might've been the worst game I've ever played. We really need to bounce back, especially since Westmore is our next opponent.

And it seems like number eleven noticed I was already thinking about how to beat his school. When I checked my phone after we got back to the dorm, he had sent me a message.

roenalejo11: Still a good game, Kai. Rest well and bounce back in the next game.

Oh yeah, I forgot—he actually watched the game live today—

My eyes widened as I realized something.

Shit… How embarrassing! He saw my misreceive at the very beginning! Our MVP saw me mess up! What was I thinking, Kaizen? Of all the times number eleven could've watched live, it had to be during our loss? During one of my off games?

kaireyes: Thank you. But are you really telling us to bounce back in the next game? Westmore is our next opponent.

roenalejo11: Oh.

I laughed at his response. Look at this, MVP? You're telling us to bounce back when your school is our next opponent? Thankfully, he's not part of their lineup, or else we'd have no chance. We can only hope to beat them.

I'm not being negative, but we also need to be realistic.

We still have a lot of training to do to match the level of Westmore and Easton's systems.

That's where positive thinking comes in—we believe we can do it. I know Creston has what it takes.

kaireyes: So please tell your team not to play too hard, okay? Have mercy on Creston, haha.

roenalejo11: Okay.

kaireyes: What do you mean, "Okay"? Hahaha! By the way, are you going to watch live again?

roenalejo11: Yes. I'll be cheering for both Westmore and Creston.

kaireyes: You can't do that, MVP! Just cheer for Westmore, or better yet, don't watch at the arena at all.

roenalejo11: Why? I want to see you play live.

kaireyes: We lost the last time you watched, you know. You must be bad luck.

roenalejo11: ☹

I laughed again. Poor number eleven—he's acting all sad now. I can just imagine him frowning right now. Knowing him, he's probably wondering if he really is bad luck.

But at least he knows another emoji besides that creepy smile.

kaireyes: Just kidding, haha. We really did play badly yesterday.

roenalejo11: Do you want iced coffee? To cheer you up?

Oh no, here comes the rich-kid side of number eleven again. He's treating me again! I'm already embarrassed. This would be the seventh time he's treated me, and since I'm not that shameless yet, I can't accept this time.

kaireyes: I'll treat you instead when we beat Westmore on Saturday. You've treated me so many times already. It's my turn now.

roenalejo11: Hmm…

kaireyes: Deal?

roenalejo11: Thailand?

kaireyes: Don't joke around, MVP! Something student-friendly, please.

roenalejo11: Haha, alright. Deal. I'm already looking forward to it.

But I think I might've dug myself into a hole.

Not because of the treat, but because of my arrogant assumption that we'll beat Westmore.

Why do I keep forgetting that even though we're facing Team B from Westmore, they're still just as good as their Team A? Heck, even if they sent their Team Z, they'd probably still be amazing. Lord, have mercy on us.

It's set 5. The score is 14-13. Match point. We're ahead, but Westmore has the momentum. It was 14-8 earlier. I thought the game was ours, but they managed to catch up.

Error after error happened on our side, and the opponent took advantage of it. It's honestly frustrating. It's true what they say—Creston isn't the one playing; it's us making mistakes.

It's annoying because we actually prefer it when things are tough. This game is a real heart-stopper.

"Nice pass!" Jerome shouted after I received the jump serve from Westmore's setter.

One more point, Kai.

One more point, and we win.

"Finish it! Finish it!" I yelled as I set the ball to Vince. But it was blocked!

The crowd erupted, especially when Jerome managed to cover the ball, but it flew out of the court. I ran and threw my body to save it. Thankfully, I managed to lift the ball and send it back to Westmore's court. The arena roared as I crashed into the barricades.

"Nice one, Kai!"

My teammates quickly helped me up. My back hurt, but I ignored it. I had to get back to our court immediately!

I rushed back to our side to defend, just as Westmore's middle blocker went for a hit. A running attack! A down-the-line shot, but I read it perfectly and dug it to Jerome. Thank goodness!

"Finish it!" I shouted as I quickly set the ball to Drew. I thought he'd go for a powerful spike, but he decided to do a dropball while in mid-air!

It felt like we all stopped breathing as we watched the ball slowly cross over the net... until it finally landed on Westmore's court!

"Creston University wins the game!"

Shit... We won?

We won!

We won against Westmore!

It’s Westmore’s Team B, but still!

Creston’s supporters erupted in cheers, and I felt my teammates gather around and hug each other. We jumped up and down like we’d just won a championship game. It was amazing!

And in the middle of it all, I searched the crowd for number eleven. I saw him standing, clapping, and looking at me. He smiled—this time showing his teeth—and gave me a thumbs-up.

I smiled back.

13

And since we won against Westmore, of course, I had to fulfill my promise to treat number eleven. At first, he didn't want to, but I reminded him that we had a deal. I'm not sure if MVP was just feeling shy or if he thought I didn't have enough money to treat him.

But whatever it was, I wasn't going to let him go without being treated, especially since I was still so happy about our win against Westmore after three long years. I didn't care that it was their Team B we defeated—a win is a win, right? Plus, I had this feeling that it might be our last win against them.

Coach mentioned that they might suddenly put some of their Team A members into the lineup, especially since the semifinals were approaching.

But of course, whoever they send out, Creston U all the way!

One game at a time.

We'll keep pushing until we reach the finals and hopefully win the championship. That would be a huge boost for the team as we enter the main season. But at the same time, there's this scary superstition about winning off-season tournaments.

It's said that whoever wins the off-season tournament doesn't win the in-season championship.

That's exactly what happened to Easton. They were the reigning champions of the off-season, but everyone knows they only got silver during the in-season. And no one has broken that curse yet.

I hope Creston will be the one to do it.

kaireyes: I'm already here.

I arrived early at our meeting spot with number eleven. It was the same waiting shed across from the main building of Westmore University.

I sat down and started watching rabbit videos on Instagram to pass the time. Once I felt satisfied, I opened the front camera on my phone to check if I still looked okay.

I got self-conscious the first time I met number eleven—he looked so composed while I looked disheveled. So today, I made an effort to dress up. I wore a white shirt under a dark brown plaid long-sleeved polo. I left all the buttons open. Paired it with jeans and black Converse. I also brought a small sling bag for my phone and wallet.

Jerome teased me earlier before I left, saying I had a date. He still insists on the idea that I have a girlfriend. I just let him think whatever he wants.

Leaving doesn't automatically mean I have a date, right?

Maybe number eleven and I are just eating together?

"Hey, number eleven!"

I jumped in surprise when someone suddenly honked in front of me. When I looked, there was a dark blue car there. The window was already down, and I stood up when I saw number eleven inside!

Wait, was that really him? Was he driving a car?

I blinked. Yes… he's driving a car! So he knows how to drive.

I already knew number eleven was a rich kid, but why did he bring a car? Where does he plan to take me? He hasn't told me yet. I asked him last night, but his answer was just a short "*secret*." MVP is really building suspense.

He smiled at me and gestured for me to get in. And even though I was a bit confused, I followed him.

As soon as I sat in the passenger seat, he handed me an iced coffee. Wow! He even brought coffee!

"Good morning," he greeted me.

"Good morning," I replied. "Thank you for the coffee," I said as I looked around the inside of the car he was driving. Is this his? It's so beautiful, clean, and smells nice too. Not dizzying at all.

"Please put on your seatbelt."

"Oh, right. Sorry," I said as I quickly buckled up. "Your car is so nice. Wait, is this yours?"

Number eleven smiled. "Yeah. My parents gave this to me for my 18th birthday."

I nodded repeatedly. Rich kid indeed! When I turned 18, my mom and dad gave me shoes.

"Ready to go?"

"Wait," I said because things were moving a bit fast for me. "Where exactly are we going?" I asked because I assumed we'd just eat nearby.

I already guessed we were going somewhere far since why else would he bring a car if we were just eating at the corner?

"Tanay."

"Tanay? As in Tanay, Rizal?"

"Yes. Is that okay?"

"More than okay! Just not Thailand."

Number eleven laughed and started driving. Honestly, I was excited. I just didn't show it too much because I didn't want him to think I was too clueless.

Actually, this was my first time going to Tanay. I've wanted to go there for a long time, but it never worked out because I was always busy and didn't have anyone to go with.

I've watched so many vlogs about the place—especially those overlooking views and restaurants. But of course, nothing beats Baguio.

I glanced at number eleven, who was now focused on the road. Thankfully, I dressed nicely today. Look at him—he's wearing a white polo shirt, looking so clean and polished, with his neatly cut hair.

Honestly, he's kind of intimidating.

I must've stared at him for too long because he glanced at me. He hadn't been driving for long. I noticed his ears turning red. Maybe he's feeling cold?

"How much is this?" I asked, trying to break the silence.

"Hmm?"

"This iced coffee. How much did it cost?"

"Oh. It's fine."

"What do you mean, 'fine'? Isn't it my turn to treat? I'll contribute to the gas too. Tanay is far, right?"

He laughed and looked at me.

"Kai, just relax, okay?"

But I didn't back down. We probably argued for a few minutes about who should treat. Thankfully, number eleven isn't as shameless as I am yet, so in the end, I won.

"Congratulations again on your win," he said when we stopped at a red light.

I smiled widely. "Thank you. I'm glad you're not mad."

He furrowed his brow. "Why would I be mad?"

"Because your school lost?"

"It's alright. Losing is part of the game. Besides, I was actually rooting for you to win, so…" he shrugged casually.

I laughed, but at the same time, I felt happy knowing that he wanted us to win. And coming from MVP, no less! Or maybe he's just saying that because he's with me right now.

"Really?"

"Yeah," he nodded, looking almost proud of what he'd said.

"Or are you just saying that because I'm treating you today?"

"No. Really. I wanted you to win," he replied, then turned to look at me.

Our eyes met. "I always want you to win, Kai."

My smile slowly faded.

I don't know if it was just me, but there was something in his eyes when our gazes locked. He was just looking at me seriously, but… there was something else.

That same feeling again… the one I can't explain.

It's like… when he said we could meet anytime I wanted… for some reason, it's been stuck in my head ever since. I haven't thought about it too much because… what's the point?

Thankfully, the light turned green, giving me an excuse to simply look away. We started moving again, and I shifted my gaze outside. I blinked as I passed by the establishments we were driving through.

I don’t know why, but suddenly… there was *something*.

I cleared my throat to try and shake off that *something*. "Your teammates will kill you if they find out you were cheering for us back there."

"I think I’d be in more trouble if I didn’t cheer for you."

"Huh?" I frowned.

Number eleven just smiled and focused on driving again. For some reason, I suddenly realized something. His smile looks really good up close—

Shit… there’s that *something* again!

I shook my head at my own thoughts and looked back outside. I adjusted my sitting position, especially since I felt something fluttering in my stomach. I took a sip of my coffee, hoping it would go away, but it only got worse.

Tsk. It feels like nature is calling me.

14

I've seen Tanay countless times in videos on social media, but it's still completely different when you see it in person. Wow… it's so beautiful here! It's like something out of a postcard.

It's so peaceful too. It feels calm all the time, so far removed from the busy and crowded streets of Manila. And even though the sun is out, the air is cool. Living here must feel amazing.

You know what I mean—it's like a provincial area, but not quite. That's the vibe it gives off. If you're looking for a quick getaway or a road trip close to Manila, this place is perfect. I get now why so many people ride their motorbikes here.

But of course, I wouldn't trade Baguio for anything. My mom might get mad at me if I did.

Right now, number eleven and I are at a café and restaurant with an overlooking view of the Sierra Madre and Laguna de Bay. It took us over an hour to get here. There are quite a few people today since it's Sunday. They have an al fresco dining setup, so we found a spot there to make the most of the view and the fresh air.

Seriously, though. I feel like my lungs are cleaner already. This place probably hasn't been touched by pollution yet.

I took out my phone and started taking pictures of the view to post on my Instagram story later. Once I was satisfied, I looked over at number eleven—only to find him already staring at me.

And just like that, faster than instant noodles, I felt *something* again.

That *something* I quickly pushed out of my mind.

I cleared my throat. "What? Do I have sleep in my eyes?"

"Do you want me to take a picture of you with the view?"

I laughed and immediately shook my head. What is this? It would be embarrassing to pose for a picture with MVP. He was probably looking at me because I must look like a country bumpkin seeing a beautiful view for the first time. You'd think I'm not from Baguio, right? But honestly, this is my first time here. Oh well, whatever.

"Oh no, that's embarrassing. There are so many people," I replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure," I nodded repeatedly. "What about you? Do you want a picture? I'll take one of you."

He also shook his head. I laughed again. Look at that—he doesn't want to take a picture either. Number eleven is such a trickster.

"Well, you've probably taken tons of pictures here already. You come here often, right?" I asked the obvious question.

"I come here once or twice a month, especially when I'm stressed. Sometimes with my high school friends on our motorbikes."

"Wow, you ride a motorbike too?"

He nodded and smiled. I froze for a moment and took a deep breath as I found myself captivated again by his signature smile. Seriously, what's wrong with me? Number eleven has always smiled without showing his teeth, right? So why does it feel different now, Kai? He looks exactly like that creepy-smiling emoji I don't like, for crying out loud.

But his smile really is nice. Maybe I'm only appreciating it now because this is the first time I've really paid attention.

Still, there's definitely *something*—

Tsk. I don't know what's wrong with you, Kaizen.

You're overthinking things. You're probably just hungry.

I casually shifted my gaze to the menu and immediately looked for something to eat because that fluttering feeling in my stomach was back. It had disappeared earlier, right? Why is it back now? I didn't even finish my iced coffee…

"If you're free, we can come here on my motorbike sometime."

"I don't know how to ride a motorbike."

"What I mean is, you'll ride with me."

I turned to look at number eleven again. His ears were red, and for some reason, I felt *something* again.

But I ignored it.

"I don't think I know how to ride pillion. Actually, I've never tried riding pillion on a motorbike before."

"Really?"

"Really."

"I think it's time for you to try."

"I think it's better if we stick to cars. I'll handle the gas and food expenses."

Number eleven laughed. I laughed too, but I was serious. Even though I grew up in a place with winding roads, riding a motorbike to Tanay still feels scary, right? There are so many blind curves. As exciting as his idea sounds—and no matter how skilled he is at riding—I think it's better to play it safe.

"Oh yeah," I said as we called the waiter over, but we were told to wait a bit longer. "Order whatever you want, okay? Don't be shy. This is my treat. Just don't order so much that I won't have money left for my fare back to the dorm."

For the nth time, number eleven smiled. Tsk. There it is again…

I steeled myself against that smile. Pretending… it has no effect on me.

"Don't worry. I'll drop you off right in front of your dorm."

"Thanks."

"But are you sure you don't want me to treat you instead? You did beat my school—"

"Stop being stubborn, MVP," I cut him off. "This is my treat. You've treated me so many times already. Just order whatever you want. And remind me to pay you back for the iced coffee earlier."

"No. The coffee is—"

"Hep! Hep! I'm paying for it."

His lips parted slightly, and he just shook his head while smiling again. His ears were turning red again too.

I couldn't help but laugh. He's still trying to argue, huh.

The waiter arrived and took our orders. Number eleven only ordered pasta and bottled water, so I quickly added pizza and a salad to the order. Thankfully, he didn't complain because there's no way he could stop me.

I added the salad because he seems like the type who lives a healthy lifestyle. You can tell just by looking at his body. I really need to start going to the gym. My arm feels embarrassed next to his.

It reminded me of a meme I saw about biceps. There was a picture of a guy with huge arms, and the person who posted it was asking if the guy had ever headlocked someone.

I ended up glancing at number eleven's arms again.

Wow. I can't even imagine my neck getting squeezed by those arms. It's kind of scary. I definitely don't want to die with the cause of death being "*victim of a headlock*."

Not long after, our food arrived. So fast! Four stars for this place. Five stars if the food tastes good.

"How's Baguio, by the way?" number eleven asked as we started eating.

"Baguio?" I asked while taking a bite of my chicken katsu with rice. And just like that, I officially gave this restaurant five stars because it was delicious. "Oh, you mean when I went home last time?" He nodded. "It's still the same. Cold. Lots of tourists."

"Is your family there?"

"My mom and my aunt are there. My dad's in Canada—he's a nurse there."

"I see," he nodded. "Do you have siblings?"

"I'm an only child. What about you?"

"I have an older sister."

"I've always wanted to have an older sister. What's it like?"

He laughed. "Trust me, you don't want an older sister."

"Really? It feels like it would be fun having someone to compete with over breakfast, you know?" He just shook his head. Well, I guess he wouldn't understand since he doesn't know what it's like to be an only child. So I decided to steer the conversation back to Baguio. "But you've probably been to Baguio before, right?"

"Once."

"Only once? Seriously?"

"Yeah. Back when I was in high school. We only stayed there for two days, so I didn't get to explore the whole city."

"Oh, this is a sign for you to visit Baguio again! Your favorite recovery food is sinigang, right? Try strawberry sinigang when you go. It's my favorite."

He furrowed his brow. "Strawberry… sinigang?"

"Hey, it exists! My mom's recipe is amazing. Haven't you heard of watermelon sinigang? It's similar to that, but instead of watermelon, they use strawberries to make it sour."

"Wait, there's watermelon sinigang?"

I couldn't help but laugh at the look on number eleven's face—a mix of confusion and amazement at these new discoveries. I could already imagine his reaction if he found out fried chicken sinigang exists too.

"It exists. Don't judge until you've tried it. So, what are you waiting for? Go! Visit Baguio!" I sounded like a tourism officer, complete with hand gestures. I couldn't help but laugh at my own silliness. But MVP… he was just staring at me. He probably didn't get my joke. I stopped laughing mid-way. This was awkward.

I cleared my throat. "Anyway, you should visit Baguio, MVP. That's the main point."

"Hmm…" he nodded, then suddenly smiled. "Will you be my tour guide then?"

We locked eyes again. A strong gust of wind blew at the same time.

Shit… he flashed his signature smile again. I couldn't escape it. I couldn't look away, especially not from…

How red his lips were—

Damn it, Kaizen? Get a grip!

But it was too late. I was starting to feel *something* again.

"Kai?"

"H-huh?"

I blinked. If I hadn't heard him call my name, I probably wouldn't have snapped out of it… whatever that was!

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah! I'm fine!" I cleared my throat and adjusted my sitting position. I quickly took a sip of water. "What was that again? Tour guide? Oh! I've explored all of Baguio, so… sure. Uh, I'll show you around if, you know, you ever go there."

Number eleven didn't answer right away. He just stared at me, frowning slightly, but I distracted myself by focusing on eating.

Shit. I think I'm going to throw up.

15

Confirmed.

It’s really in number eleven’s smile where *something* comes from.

That’s why, during the entire duration of our meal and stay at the restaurant, I struggled so hard to avoid seeing his signature smile. Sometimes, I’d even anticipate when he was about to smile, and as soon as I sensed it, I’d immediately look away at the view.

Pretending to be chill.
Pretending not to be affected.
Pretending not to be nervous.
Pretending not to feel nauseous because of the growing butterflies in my stomach.

I’m such an idiot, Kai.

I adjusted my seat and took a sip of the fruit tea that number eleven treated me to before we decided to head back to Manila. I thought we’d go home right after eating, but he suggested going to a coffee shop.

I was about to decline—not because I didn’t want him to treat me, but because I’d already had coffee earlier on the way here. I didn’t even finish it. It was embarrassing, but the ice had melted, so it tasted bland. The iced coffee had turned into just coffee. But apparently, number eleven is a matcha lover. He said he wanted to try the matcha latte from a coffee shop one of his teammates recommended. He wanted to check if it was legitimately good.

So, I agreed.

The thing is, when I tried to hand him my payment, he didn’t accept it. He said it was on him. Of course, I protested. I was supposed to treat him today.

But he said our deal was only for lunch. Since we were done with lunch, it was now his turn to treat me. I was left speechless. MVP-level reasoning!

I was about to argue, but I froze when he suddenly ruffled my hair and smiled at me.

Boom. Kaizen was hypnotized!

I couldn’t avoid it anymore. I couldn’t even try! It was like his lips had a magnet, and my eyes were instantly drawn to them. No matter how many times I told myself to look into number eleven’s eyes instead.

And then my brain would follow it up with a wide, borderline sinful imagination...

"It’s okay, Kai," he said.

What’s okay? I’m not okay!

I felt everything again. From the nervousness... to the electric current that spread through my body when he ruffled my hair... to the nausea because my insides were in knots again. It’s honestly exhausting.

All my efforts to avoid his smile the entire day went to waste. One smile, and boom, Kaizen Reyes’ entire system is in chaos again.

When did this even start? Why didn’t I notice? Or maybe it was always there, and I just ignored it? The last time I felt like this was when—

My eyes widened, and I glanced at number eleven, who was now busy driving. I wanted to slap myself as my sinful imagination started running wild again. What's happening to me?

Why am I suddenly noticing the veins on his arms?!

I don't usually curse, but...
Damn it.

"Yes, Kai?"

I must have been staring at him for too long. He glanced at me with a small smile. I blinked and looked straight ahead.

Even his voice... why is it like that? It's so... pleasing to the ears? So gentle? Has his voice always been like that whenever we talk? And why am I noticing it now too? Ugh, whatever!

"Uh, nothing," I replied, even though so many things were bothering me.

"Are you okay?" That's like the nth time he's asked me that today.

"Yep."

"Want some music?"

"Uh, sure."

I didn't expect him to hand me his phone. He even let me choose the song. I felt pressured. I had a feeling our music tastes weren't the same. Sometimes, I listen to songs that others consider cringe or cheesy.

"Zero zero one one," said number eleven.

"Huh?"

"My phone's passcode."

"Okay—"

I froze when I realized something.

I was holding number eleven's phone!

But wait. So what? It's not like I'm going to snoop around. I'm just picking music. Just music! I started entering his passcode when another thought crossed my mind. I don't even know what's going on in my brain anymore, but what if... what if I suddenly see a message from Nica Guerrero?

You idiot, Kaizen! What are you thinking?! How did Nica Guerrero even come into this? Besides, what if she messages number eleven? They're friends, right?

But what about you?
Are you and number eleven friends?
Just... friends on your part, Kai?

I shuddered. Damn it, Kaizen! You're so annoying! Stop it, please. Stop overthinking! Find a distraction!

"Uh, can we just listen to the radio instead?" I said, then placed his phone in the compartment. "I kinda miss listening to commercials on the radio."

I wanted to sink into my seat after that lame excuse, but it was too late. I'd already said it.

Number eleven's eyebrows slightly furrowed, but he nodded. "Sure," he replied and turned on the radio.

But I almost cursed when I heard the song that was playing.

"Sa iyong ngiti, ako'y nahuhumaling!" (Because of your smile, I'm falling for you!)

I quickly switched the station. It felt like the universe was mocking me!

Are we still far from the dorm? I'd rather overthink in my room than here, sitting next to the person I'm overthinking about. I really need a distraction.

I pretended to yawn. I'll just pretend I'm sleepy. Thankfully, number eleven seemed to notice, so he let me rest. He said he'd wake me up when we got to the dorm.

I knew it would be hard to fake sleep, but no one ever said it would be harder to fake waking up. I didn't know where to pull my acting skills from without looking stupid.

I even added yawning and wiping away fake tears when number eleven woke me up. I felt so dumb.

"Sorry I fell asleep," I said. But honestly, I felt guilty for pretending to sleep on him, right? If I hadn't been overthinking so much, I wouldn't have done it because it's embarrassing. It was an emergency, though.

Number eleven smiled.

Look at his eyes, Kai!

"It's okay," he said and ruffled my hair again. I froze in my seat because there it was again—that electric feeling. "Thank you for today, Kai."

"T-Thank you too," I said as I held up my now-empty fruit tea container.

"No problem. Good luck on your upcoming games."

"Thank you. Good luck to Westmore too. Hopefully, our teams will meet in the finals."

He nodded. "See you at the games? I'll watch live if I don't have classes."

Please, not anymore, number eleven!

But of course, I couldn't say that.

I slowly nodded. "Okay."

"Okay."

"Uh, take care going home."

"I'll message you when I get home."

"S-sure. Take care again."

I got out of his car. I didn't go inside the dorm compound right away. I planned to wait until he left first, but I wish I hadn't done that because before he drove off, he gave me that smile of his again—tsk.

Lord, have mercy.

"Is that Alejo?"

I almost jumped in surprise when Jerome suddenly appeared beside me. Where did he even come from? I didn't notice him! I just shook my head at him and walked into the compound, but of course, the nosy Jerome followed me.

"Were you together? Is he the one you've been seeing, Kai?"

"No," I simply answered.

"Why were you together? Are you close? Since when?"

"He just happened to pass by and offered to drop me off."

"Really?"

"Yeah!"

"So, where did you go?"

"Just around."

"Wow, Kai! You're hiding things from us, huh? Just the two of us here, and you're still being secretive."

"You're so nosy, Captain."

Thankfully, Jerome finally left me alone. He just stared at me with squinted eyes, but I ignored him.

He wouldn't get anything out of me, no matter how many questions he asked. But why didn't I just tell him that number eleven and I were together? There's nothing wrong with that, right? We didn't do anything special. We just ate, went to a coffee shop, and treated each other. I do that with my other teammates too.

Oh well. I already have too much on my mind. I don't want to add more.

I took another shower and climbed into bed, hoping to drift off to sleep. Thankfully, I was alone in our room, so I could wrap myself up like a lumpia in my blanket while trying to fall asleep. But even after several minutes passed, I still couldn't sleep. So many thoughts were running through my mind. Questions I already knew the answers to…

I just wasn't acknowledging them.

I wasn't admitting it to myself, but deep down, I already knew what it was.

I glanced at my phone. I remembered what number eleven said—he'd message me when he got back to his dorm.

When I checked Instagram, there was a DM from him.

roenalejo11: Dorm ☺

Shit… even in emojis, I felt *something*?! Tsk. Confirmed. This is different now.

I threw my phone somewhere and rolled around in bed, my heart pounding fast.

I knew it. I just needed to get back to our dorm to confirm it. Turns out, I needed number eleven not to be beside me to realize it.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, but it wasn't working. My chest was beating even faster every time I thought about it…

I like him.

I have feelings for number eleven.

16

"Shit," I muttered as I misreceived the ball again.

How many times has it been already? I've lost count. There were moments when I did manage to receive the ball, but it wasn't good enough for the setter. The pass was too far from the net. Tsk. This is so frustrating.

"Kai, are you okay?" Coach asked.

I just gave Coach a thumbs up, even though I was honestly getting frustrated. I stood up from my crouched position and pulled up the sleeves of my t-shirt. We were in the middle of a practice game today—Team A versus Team B. Our Team B won the first set, but they're still leading in this second set. And why is that? We don't have a stable first ball. And who's responsible for receiving? Aside from the outside spiker, it's the libero.

And who's the libero failing to receive right now? Me, Kai.

I feel bad for Drew, honestly. There were moments when he had to cover for me during reception, which shouldn't be happening. That's part of my job. It's infuriating that I can't do it properly right now because I'm distracted.

What if I carry these misreceives into an actual game? I don't want to be the reason our team loses, especially since the semifinals are approaching. Every game is crucial, especially among the top four teams in the off-season tournament.

And our opponents are smart. If they find out you're having an off-game, especially in reception, they'll target you with their serves.

I need to fix this.

This can't go on, Kai. Stop thinking about… tsk.

"Sorry," I said to Jerome because he'd been running around nonstop just to chase the ball and set it. Thankfully, he's a skilled setter—he manages to make it work—but we can't rely on that all the time. He can't keep exhausting himself early in the game.

My job as the libero is to make the setter's life easier.

Ideally, the setter shouldn't have to move too much from their position once they're setting. This allows them to create combination plays instead of always relying on predictable sets.

Because if the opponent can easily read where the ball is going, it could result in a kill block.

And that doesn't just lower the confidence of the spikers—it makes them more prone to being blocked repeatedly.

That's why the first ball is everything in volleyball.

Everything starts there when you're receiving the serve.

"Are you okay?" Jerome asked during a quick break called by Coach. Team A had won the set. Two sets to one. I managed to recover a bit, especially toward the end of the third set, but I'm still not satisfied with my performance. I need to bounce back quickly.

I just nodded and drank some water.

"No, you're not. You've had so many misreceives. That's not like you," Jerome shook his head. "What's on your mind, Kai? You've clearly been spacing out."

Am I really that obvious?

"It's nothing. I'm just tired because we had an exam earlier."

"What? Did you get into a fight with your girlfriend or something?"

"For the nth time, I don't have a girlfriend!"

And how could I, when number eleven isn't even a girl—

Damn it, Kai?! What's wrong with you?! Why are you even imagining things like that? Do you think something will happen between you two? Stop it! That's only in your dreams! Just imagine what people would think if they found out you like him. They'd freak out for sure!

They might even… avoid you completely.

Then stop talking to you. Then maybe he'll intentionally facial hit me the next time we face each other.

Shit. This is so annoying! Why am I suddenly feeling sad? It's my fault anyway, if anything. I'm probably being karma'd already. Maybe my ability to receive well is slowly leaving me.

But why am I even worrying about how number eleven might react if he ever finds out I like him? I mean, I don't have to tell him, right?

It's simple, yet I'm overcomplicating it.

That's exactly what I should do—nothing.

This… whatever this is… will probably pass eventually.

"So, what? Are you thinking about Alejo, huh?"

My eyes widened, and I almost choked even though I wasn't drinking anything. I coughed and wanted to deny what Jerome said, but I couldn't. My throat suddenly felt sore!

"Damn it, Alejo?!" Jerome teased, patting me on the back.

"N-no!" I finally managed to recover and reply.

"Yeah, right! Tell me already—did he scare you or something? What did he say to you when I saw you two last Sunday, huh?"

"It's nothing—"

"Come on, Kai! Tell me! What did he say? You two weren't close before, right? It's impossible that he just happened to pass by and dropped you off at the dorm. I'm sure he said something to you, which is why you're so distracted now."

"He didn't say anything—"

"Did he tell you to throw the remaining games so Westmore can have a chance to rank number one?"

I just gaped at Jerome's wild imagination. Wow. His mind really went off in every direction. I didn't even think of that, and my mind's usually wandering too!

"What, Kai? Are you and Alejo from Westmore close now?" Vince suddenly chimed in, appearing beside me.

"You guys are so nosy! I'm just tired from schoolwork. Stop jumping to conclusions!"

"No, come on, Kai! Tell us already—"

Thankfully, Coach called us back, temporarily stopping their pestering.

In the days that followed, I spent most of my time either training or doing schoolwork. Whenever I had free time, I'd watch *Haikyuu*. When I got tired of that, I cleaned our room. I even volunteered to do random chores—anything to distract myself from certain thoughts.

Anything but the image of number eleven's smile stuck in my mind.

Thankfully, he hasn't messaged me these past few days. At least I don't feel guilty since I don't plan to reply until I've had time to reflect.

I don't want to overthink my feelings for him or… what I really am, for that matter. I'll probably think about it after the off-season is over. Right now, I really need to focus. Especially because of my poor reception in recent games, I'm nervous about our next match, even though I know we can do it. It's not that I'm underestimating Southern University, but we have a good chance of beating them.

It's just that… the ball is still round, after all.

"Kai, what's going on with you? You still haven't made a decent first ball!" Coach scolded me during a timeout.

It was Set 4, and Southern University was leading with two sets. We won Set 1, but they fought back and took Sets 2 and 3. Both ended with a score of 25-23, which was incredibly frustrating. And I know I contributed a lot to those losses. Now, in Set 4, they're ahead again—13-10.

We need to take this to a fifth set, or a huge upset will happen. And worse, we might end up facing Easton right away in the semifinals.

I'm really disappointed in myself.

I thought I was okay, at least somewhat. My reception had improved during our last training—I felt like my energy was back.

But, shit, just one glance at number eleven, who's now in the middle of the crowd… just one cheer from him… just one smile…

I lost my focus again.

The adrenaline I needed for the game disappeared. My first ball was gone again. Two consecutive service aces from the opponent were received by me, poorly.

It's so frustrating!

"Sorry, Coach. I'll make up for it," I said.

"You've been saying that you'll bounce back, but I don't see it happening. Whatever it is you're thinking about right now, we'll talk about it later. But for now, the team needs you."

"Yes, Coach."

"Kai, fight!" Jerome said, ruffling my hair.

"Smile again, Kai," Vince added. "You play better when you're happy, remember?"

I felt my teammates patting my head one after another, so I nodded at all of them. The team needs me right now. I just need to get my confidence back. Stop thinking about unnecessary things. Focus on the game first.

We're going to win. I know it.

"I'll receive properly this time, guys," I told them.

"One good pass, alright? They're only three points ahead. We can catch up!"

"Creston!"

"U!"

We returned to the court, and I immediately got ready to receive. But before the referee blew the whistle for the serve, I quickly glanced at number eleven.

He was already looking at me. His face was serious, but my heart was still racing.

After a moment, I saw him raise his left fist, as if telling me to *laban* (*fight)*.

I mean, *fighting*, since he's such an English speaker.

I gave number eleven a small smile. Then I took a deep breath and nodded at him.

The referee blew the whistle, and the opponent's server didn't waste any time. He sent a quick float serve, but for the first time in Set 4, I received it without any trouble! I silently thanked God for that.

That's how it should be, Kai!

Why are you letting what should inspire you become a distraction instead?

"Nice pass!"

Creston's supporters erupted in cheers as Drew quickly killed the ball. We celebrated, and that's when I finally felt the adrenaline rush through my body.

The game continued, and we won Set 4.

And eventually, Creston triumphed in five thrilling sets.

We also won our last game in the preliminary rounds. The whole team was happy because out of 9 games, we won 8 and only lost 1. We're number 2 in the standings. Easton is number 1 since they're undefeated. I'm already nervous about facing them. Meanwhile, Westmore is number 3 with 2 losses, and Northville is number 4.

Ten teams competed, but only the top 4 will advance to the semifinals. The format is Rank 1 vs. Rank 4, and Rank 2 vs. Rank 3.

Which means we'll be facing Westmore.

Honestly, they're a scary opponent.

Our nervousness about Easton is pointless because we should be more worried about Westmore first. Yes, we beat them in the preliminaries, but it went to 5 sets. There's no twice-to-beat advantage for Rank 1 and 2 like in the in-season tournament. The semifinals are a best-of-3, so we need to win twice.

That's why Game 1 is so crucial.

Whoever wins that will have a huge advantage.

But 3 days before the semifinals started, our chances of making it to the championship game suddenly seemed to dim. We found out that some members of their Team A will be playing!

Apparently, some of their players got sick, and one got injured during training. My head started to ache when our coach told us that.

Seriously. We already struggled against their Team B, and now their Team A is playing? Can't they just hand this to us? They can make up for it in the in-season tournament!

Tsk. Looks like we'll need some intense training, huh?

"Damn it. That's so unfair! Are they even allowed to switch players in the middle of the tournament?" Jerome, who was sitting next to me, angrily said as we were eating together after training.

"I checked. They can replace or add players to the lineup if someone is sick or injured," Drew replied, looking at his phone.

We all sighed in unison.

"We can do this, guys! We already beat them. Don't tell me you're thinking it was just luck?" Vince said.

"Wasn't it?" Kiko answered with a laugh.

We all looked at each other and sighed again. We didn't want to think it was just luck, even though they fielded their Team B. But like I said, we also need a reality check in life.

We struggled in that game.

We almost lost.

The better mindset to have now is that there's always a chance to win because the ball is round. We can't say for sure until the opponent wins three sets.

We just have to fight. That's why we're training. We just need to enjoy the game and make sure no one gets injured on any team. Knock on wood.

But I know Creston can do it. We can do it.

"Come on! We can do this! We're already in the semifinals," Jerome said, and I nodded. We were on the same page.

"Exactly! As long as Vince doesn't make any errors!" Paul chimed in, starting to tease again.

"Jerk! You focus on blocking first!"

I just shook my head as they started bickering.

"Kai, do you think Alejo will play?" Jerome asked, not joining in on the team's teasing.

"Alejo?"

"Roen Alejo from Westmore. Their outside hitter."

I guess I've gotten so used to calling him "number eleven" that my brain took a moment to process who Alejo was.

Honestly, it was only then that I realized there's a possibility he might play. I forgot that MVP is from Westmore. Suddenly, I felt even more worried. If he does play, our chances of winning just got even slimmer.

This isn't something we can solve with a simple chant of *"laban!"*

But he hasn't said anything to me these past few days—

Oh, shit.

Right... How would I even know if I've been ignoring his messages for days? The last DM he sent me was when he asked me to treat him after we won our last game in the preliminaries. After that, nothing. My plan was to talk to him after the off-season was over. Don't get me wrong. It's not that I see him as a distraction again. I just really want to focus on the tournament for now. Plus, finals week at Creston is coming up.

See? My feelings for number eleven are only third on my priority list right now.

I shuddered. Damn it. I'm really feeling my feelings for him, huh?

As if I'd ever admit it.

As if I even have a chance.

Tsk. Keep dreaming, Kai.

Suddenly, I felt sad—

Ah, whatever! He's not a distraction, okay? If anything, I've been motivating myself by lurking on his IG profile, which is practically gathering dust. His last post was a picture of him holding their championship trophy, biting his medal.

I'm aware that number eleven is good-looking. A lot of people at Creston already have crushes on him. Imagine how many more there are at his own school, where they actually get to see him in person, right?

But now that I’m aware that... well, I like him, I’ve been spending more time lurking on his profile.

Because number eleven is really handsome.

Especially his smile—

"Kai!"

"H-ha?"

I looked at Jerome, who was frowning at me. Shit. He caught me daydreaming! How embarrassing!

"W-what is it?"

"You zoned out!" He even pinched my cheek. "I said, message Alejo."

I blinked. "Huh? Why would I message him?"

"Ask him if he’s playing."

"I don’t want to. And why should I be the one to message him?"

Jerome smirked. That smirk of his felt like he knew something I didn’t.

"Come on. I already know you two have been chatting. Don’t deny it, Kai. I saw you one day. So, how did you two get close, huh?"

I panicked. "W-we’re not close—"

"Tsk. So what if you are? It’s not a big deal. Why are you hiding it? Why don’t you introduce him to us?"

I couldn’t answer. Honestly, I don’t even know why I haven’t told them about it. Ugh, I don’t know. I already have so much on my mind. I don’t want to think about this right now. Maybe next time.

Jerome laughed and pinched my cheek again.

"Just message him, Kai."

"I don’t want to," I pouted.

"Why not?"

Because I planned to talk to him only after the off-season ends.

I just frowned and glared at him.

"Tsk. Fine! I’ll just ask Coach," Jerome said with a laugh, shaking his head as he joined the team’s noisy chatter.

It was already 10 PM when we finished training. When I got back to the dorm, I quickly showered and was about to sleep when I glanced at my phone.

Should I message number eleven? I’d only be asking if he’s playing… But didn’t I tell myself, Kai, that I wouldn’t talk to him until after the off-season?

It’s just a question!

But wouldn’t it be weird that I didn’t reply to his last message and now I’m suddenly messaging him out of the blue? Wouldn’t that make me look bad?

I don’t know anymore!

But I’ll admit… I kind of miss talking to MVP in DMs.

Tsk. I really don’t know what to do!

In the end, I picked up my phone but immediately hesitated. What would I even say? How would I start the message? I can’t just jump into asking if he’s playing in the semis without addressing the fact that I ignored his last message, right?

I threw my phone somewhere. I won’t message him! After the off-season! Calm down, Kaizen!

But just as I was about to fall onto my bed, my phone suddenly rang. Vince laughed at me, but I ignored him. I quickly checked it and saw that number eleven had sent me a DM!

I took a deep breath, especially when my heart started racing faster and harder. Calm down, Kaizen, damn it!

roenalejo11: Kai.

That was all he wrote, but… tsk. Why am I getting so nervous?!

I was about to reply when he sent another message.

roenalejo11: Are we cool?

kaireyes: Hey! Sorry I haven’t replied these past few days. You know, busy with school and training, hehe.

But number eleven didn’t reply right away. He read my message, but minutes passed, and he still hadn’t responded. I pouted. Is MVP getting back at me? Well, I guess I deserve it… but… it feels kind of sad?

Tsk. This is bad.

This is exactly what I hate when I develop feelings for someone. Even the smallest things make my emotions go haywire.

It’s like… back when I liked Reena.

I was about to put my phone away when it suddenly rang. I almost dropped my phone when I saw number eleven on the caller ID! Shit, is this real?! Oh right, he did ask for my number when we went to Tanay!

I quickly stood up and headed to the hallway to answer the call. I tripped along the way too. Damn it!

"Are you okay, Kai? Where are you going? You’re not allowed to go out," I heard Jerome say.

"Just nearby. I’ll take this call," I quickly replied and stepped out of our room.

I jogged a little farther for some privacy. But just as I was about to answer the call, it suddenly cut off, followed by another message from number eleven.

roenalejo11: Asleep already? Good night, Kai.

kaireyes: I'm not asleep yet, hehe. Why did you call?

But instead of replying, he called again. I quickly answered it.

"Hey," he greeted, his voice deep and smooth.

And just like that, I felt weak again.

18

"Hey," number eleven greeted, his voice low and husky.

Shit… why does his voice sound like this on the call? It's like he just woke up. His voice is already deep in person, but I didn't expect it to get even deeper. And it's infuriating because just hearing one word from him makes my knees tremble.

What's wrong with me, Kai?!

Do you miss him already? It's only been a few days since you last talked to him. What happened to waiting until after the off-season to talk to him? Tsk.

"Hey," I replied. I don't know how I managed to sound so casual, but somehow I pulled it off. I'm even amazed at myself for doing it. And I need to stay consistent.

He can't sense that there's *something* going on with me toward him.

I need to calm down.

Thankfully, he can't see me right now. I feel like a high school student panicking because they're talking to their crush on the phone. My heart is pounding so hard, and I feel like I might pass out or pee myself.

Chill, Kaizen!

"I'm—" "Wait," I cut him off.

"Huh?"

"Uh, I'm just going to the lobby."

"Oh. Okay…"

I quickly went down to the lobby. It's better to talk to number eleven here. First, so my teammates don't bug me if they see me in the hallway. Second, I don't think I can handle standing because my knees are literally shaking.

Once I sat down, I took a deep breath. I've got this. I'm just talking to number eleven on the phone. No big deal.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hey," he replied immediately. Shit, that voice really is something.

"Hey."

Silence.

I glanced at my phone, thinking the call had dropped, but he was still there.

"Hello? Are you still there, MVP?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you hung up on me."

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry for calling without asking your permission first."

"It's fine," I replied, even though I almost fell over when I saw who was calling earlier. "Uh… why did you call, anyway?"

I heard him chuckle softly. Why does his laugh sound different on the call too? And why does it have such an effect on me? It's like my ears are being blessed.

"I actually don't know. I think I just got too excited when you finally replied after almost a week?"

I don't know why, but my heart started beating even faster when I heard that. I took another deep breath and leaned back in my seat.

"Ah…" I laughed to hide my guilt. "Well, this week has been pretty intense for me. You know, schoolwork. Plus, our training sessions have gotten tougher because the semifinals are coming up. And you guys are our opponents, so…"

"I understand, Kai. I thought…" He switched to Tagalog, which made me sit up straight. "...I just thought I said something that made you mad at me."

I smiled because he couldn't quite pull off speaking in Tagalog smoothly. But at the same time, his last sentence made me frown.

"Why would I be mad?"

"Because of my last message?"

"What about your last message—" I paused. "Oh! You mean when you said you'd treat me because we won last time?"

"Yeah…"

"But didn't we already talk about that? That there's no treating for now because I might get used to it?" I laughed, but number eleven stayed quiet. "But seriously, you don't have to treat me every time we win. I'm okay with just your *congratulatory* messages."

"But I like doing that for you, Kai."

Shit. I couldn't dodge that one. I placed my hand on my chest as my heart raced uncontrollably. Damn this heart of mine. So… flirtatious.

Inhale, exhale, Kaizen! Calm yourself!

"You're just trying to make me fat," I joked, pretending to be cool, even though I was punching the pillow on the lobby sofa. "You just want me to gain weight so I can't chase the ball properly in the semifinals since Westmore is our opponent."

"What? No—"

"Oh, come on, MVP. Stop lying."

"No, really. I just want you to always be full."

I burst out laughing. He's so conyo! "Full and healthy?"

"What?" He was laughing too. I don’t know what to do with you, MVP.

"Nothing," I replied, adjusting my sitting position again. "Speaking of Westmore, I have a question."

"Hmm?"

"Are you playing in the semifinals?"

A few seconds passed, but number eleven didn’t answer. I checked my phone to see if he had hung up, but he was still there. Seriously! Why is he building suspense like this?

"Hey," I said. "Are you still there? Are you playing? We heard some of your Team B members got sick, and someone got injured, so they’re bringing in some players from Team A. Are you included?"

He cleared his throat. "Actually, they asked me to play."

"Oh no. So, you’re really playing? Wow! Congratulations in advance to Westmore! Champions for both the in-season and off-season!"

"What?"

"That’s probably why you kept treating me, huh? It was all part of your plan, wasn’t it? This is the plot twist—turns out, you’re playing. You sneaky guy."

"No. I won’t play, Kai."

"Wait, what?" I stopped when I heard what he said. "Huh? Really? You’re not playing?"

"They asked me to play, but I refused."

"W-why?"

"Because I’d rather cheer for you."

"Huh?"

"I prefer cheering for you than playing against you, Kai."

Oh, shit.

I immediately grabbed the pillow next to me and started punching it again. Damn, number eleven really knows how to lay on the charm. This isn’t healthy for my heart. At this rate, I might not even make it to the semifinals if he keeps saying things like that.

Cause of death: Kai’s kilig (fluttery feelings).

This is so frustrating. Thankfully, he’s not here in front of me right now because I’m pretty sure my whole face is red.

But… damn, why do I suddenly want to video call him just to see his face while making him repeat what he just said?

I don’t know what’s wrong with you, Kai. My friends were right when they said I change completely when I start liking someone.

Ugh, whatever. I'll just use this as motivation for the semifinals. I'll let myself feel this way until the tournament ends, and then I'll figure out what to do next.

But… come on, it's not like I have any real "next move."

There's a big chance this is one-sided. Actually, it's not even a big chance—it's reality. Or maybe this is just a harmless crush. Maybe I'm just happy because number eleven has always been nice to me. Ugh, whatever. I don't want to overthink this anymore.

"Nice pass, Kai!" Vince shouted after I received the serve from Westmore's middle blocker.

Jerome quickly set it to Paul for an A-quick, and thankfully, Westmore's blockers couldn't reach it, so it was an instant point for Creston. Because of that, our school's supporters erupted in cheers inside the arena.

It's Game 1 of the semifinals. I didn't expect it, but the arena is packed today. And true to his word, number eleven isn't playing. Still, Westmore is tough—they've fielded their entire starting unit from Team A! We thought they'd still mix in some players from Team B, but the only one missing from their lineup is number eleven, who's sitting behind their bench.

We're now in Set 4. They're leading with two sets. They took Sets 1 and 2. We managed to win Set 3 with a score of 27-25.

Damn. If number eleven hadn't refused to play, this game might have been over already.

And speaking of number eleven, he's there now, sitting just behind Westmore's bench. We locked eyes earlier, and he just smiled at me. I smiled back. I took a deep breath.

Here we are. Might as well fight for this. The ball is still round.

A volleyball game doesn't end just because you've won two sets unless it's beach volleyball.

It's just that… Westmore is incredibly strong. It's like volleyball is so easy for them. The score in this Set 4 is 18-12 in favor of the opponent. It's frustrating because out of the 7 points we've scored, 5 were from their errors. Only 5 points came from our actual efforts.

I'm proud that we've minimized our errors, but the problem is we just can't convert, especially during transitions.

They're blocking every single one of our spikes!

"Free ball!" I shouted so our front row wouldn't block unnecessarily.

I received the ball and quickly checked Westmore's defense pattern. When I saw their blockers guarding Drew, I pointed to Vince for Jerome to set a D-ball.

"Backrow, Captain!"

And boom! Another point for Creston U!

The crowd erupted in cheers again. That was enough to get our adrenaline pumping.

But just when we thought we had the momentum, Westmore University surged ahead. They defeated us in 4 sets in Game 1 of the semifinals.

19

"I just want to sleep," I told Jerome as we were packing up the balls we used during training.

He laughed and shook his head. You could see how tired he was, which was unusual because his energy is always high even after an intense training session. Well, it's not just him—everyone on the team is exhausted.

When Coach found out we didn't have any morning classes today, he suddenly called for a training session—from 4 AM to 8 AM! We usually train at night to make way for our classes. It was so hard for all of us to get up this morning, but it seems like Coach really took our loss to Westmore the other day to heart.

Honestly, I hate morning workouts and training.

It would've been fine if we didn't have classes afterward. I'm sure I'll end up fighting sleep later because I'm already so tired.

But I can't blame Coach either. Our performance in Game 1 of the semifinals was really disappointing. If we play the same way in Game 2, there's no hope.

Let's face it—when Westmore brought in their Team A lineup, our chances of making it to the finals pretty much disappeared. It looks like we might even lose in the battle for third place, and we're not even sure if we'll win that.

But I keep telling myself it's still possible.

The game isn't over yet.

If we don't have the right mindset as a team, then we'll definitely lose.

"I'm going to shower first," I said, heading straight to the bathroom as soon as we got back to the dorm.

I had a class at 10 AM. Thankfully, I'd already finished presenting my report for that subject because I felt like I was going to fall asleep from how sore my body was.

"Kai, I watched your game against Westmore," my classmate Marivic said when I got to our classroom. "You'll bounce back in Game 2. You can do it!"

I smiled. "Thank you."

"But they're really strong, huh? And Roen Alejo wasn't even playing!"

I froze for a moment when she mentioned number eleven. He messaged me right after the game, saying we'd bounce back in Game 2. He even invited me to grab ice cream that day, but it didn't happen because Coach immediately called us back to training.

Such a shame.

Well, I guess I would've been okay with losing to Westmore if I had an ice cream date with number eleven.

Hey, Kaizen. A date?

Only I think of it as a date!

What delusions, Kai?

So embarrassing! It’s all in my head. Tsk.

"Yeah, right," I replied to Marivic before I got lost in another argument with my own brain. "I’ll just nap for a bit, okay? I just came from training. Just wake me up when the professor arrives."

"Oh, go ahead. Sleep."

"Thanks."

But barely 10 minutes passed before our professor arrived, and class started. That’s how my day went until 2 PM. I’d sleep whenever class hadn’t started yet, and then I’d struggle to stay awake during discussions, my eyes straining to stay open. I even drank coffee earlier!

I really wanted to go back to the dorm and sleep properly, but I still had one last class from 4:30 PM to 6 PM. I hoped there wouldn’t be a quiz because I was mentally blocked during my second class earlier. I almost couldn’t answer anything.

And after that, more training. Just thinking about it made me feel exhausted. It’s like I’ve already borrowed all the fatigue I should’ve felt next year.

After this off-season, I’m definitely catching up on sleep.

But what if number eleven invites me out again?

Well… I could always sleep in his car while he drives to wherever, right?

I laughed at my own thoughts. You’re really something else, Kai. Just sleep already!

I went to the library to nap comfortably since it’s cool there because of the air conditioning. As Jerome said, we’re technically paying for it since it’s included in our tuition.

I lightly tapped my forehead. I think he forgot we’re student-athletes and don’t pay tuition fees. What a joker.

I set my phone to *vibrate* and was about to hide it when a notification popped up. Number eleven sent me a DM! And I hadn’t turned off my mobile data! I quickly adjusted my sitting position and got excited. I immediately felt my chest pounding. Seriously? Just one DM from number eleven, and I’m already wide awake? Is this the effect he has on me now?

roenalejo11: Hey.

kaireyes: Hey.

Number eleven didn’t reply right away. It took him three minutes to send another message.

roenalejo11: I’m sorry. Do you have class today?

kaireyes: Yep. Why?

roenalejo11: Are you in the middle of class right now? If you are, we can talk later.

kaireyes: I skipped this one. My next class isn’t until 4:30.

roenalejo11: Oh.

kaireyes: Why? What's up?
roenalejo11: Can I call you then?

I hesitated to reply immediately. Shit, why is he calling? Doesn't he have class today? Obviously, Kai? If he did, he probably wouldn't call, right? Ugh, I don't know.

I quickly grabbed my things and left the library. I headed straight to Creston Gardens because it's quiet there and breezy, thanks to all the trees. Thankfully, there weren't many people around. I sat down at one of the kiosks and tried to calm myself.

My breathing eventually steadied, but my heart was still racing.

Deep down, I knew exactly who I was talking to—number eleven. Tsk.

kaireyes: Okay.

Not even a minute passed before number eleven called. The background was quiet when he spoke, his deep voice smooth as ever.

"Hi."

"Hello," I replied, pretending I wasn't flustered earlier. "You're calling?"

"You said your next class is at 4:30, right?"

"Uhm, yes."

"Would you like some ice cream while waiting for it?"

I blinked. My lips parted slightly, and my heart started pounding even harder. Shit… number eleven is inviting me for ice cream again? Did I hear that right?

I looked around for a pillow to punch, but all I could see were plants and trees. I couldn't exactly hurt the poor plants, could I?

Tsk. Where am I supposed to let out this kilig (fluttery feeling)?

"Uhm," I cleared my throat. "Ice cream… with you?"

As soon as I said that, I already knew what—or rather who—I wanted to punch. Myself! Damn, why did I have the audacity to ask that?! Obviously, it's ice cream *with him* since he's the one inviting me. Why would I assume he wouldn't be there?

What's wrong with me, Kai?!

I just wanted to crawl into my messenger bag out of embarrassment!

But my attention went back to number eleven when I heard him laugh. In an instant, all my exhaustion seemed to vanish. It felt like I could go through another training session.

"Yeah. Ice cream with me."

I almost plucked a leaf from the plant beside me. Calm down, Kaizen!

"O-okay…"

"So, yes to ice cream?"

"S-sure. But wait, should we meet again at the waiting shed across Westmore? Give me 10 minutes. Or 15, depending on traffic."

"Actually, Kai, I'm already here in Creston's parking lot."

"Really?!" I stood up immediately.

I grabbed my bag and headed straight to the parking lot. Damn, MVP! What if I hadn't agreed? But it's impossible for me to say no unless I had class or training.

When I got there, my eyes immediately scanned the area, searching for him. I tried to recall what his car looked like—dark blue, right?

"Where are you parked?" I asked because Creston's parking lot is pretty huge.

Number eleven didn't answer. I thought the call had dropped, but then I heard the sound of a car door closing in the background. I looked around, and my mouth fell open when I saw number eleven appear not far from me.

He was standing there, holding his phone still pressed to his ear while looking at me. And it looked like he had just come from class because he was still wearing his school uniform.

It was the first time I'd seen him in his school uniform.

Shit… he looked so clean. So… handsome.

"There you are," I heard him say, followed by a smile.

I blinked. I couldn't speak because it felt like my heart had jumped into my throat.

20

"Chocolate ice cream for Kai," number eleven said with a smile as he returned to our table carrying the ice creams he had ordered.
"Thank you," I smiled back at him.

Number eleven brought me to an ice cream shop not far from Creston. At first, I thought we'd just be buying dirty ice cream from a cart in Luneta Park. I forgot that MVP here is a rich kid, and street vendor ice cream isn't exactly part of his vocabulary or taste buds.

And honestly, it was kind of cute. He already knew exactly what flavor I'd pick. Maybe he remembered when we bumped into each other at the convenience store before. And of course, his choice was matcha flavor.

"How much is this?" I asked as soon as he sat down.

Damn. This guy is so effortlessly fresh. It's like he's not even a student-athlete. Why is that? So unfair. On top of that, he's an engineering student! You'd think he's some chicken living in a stress-free environment. Meanwhile, I feel like eyebags have grown over my head and body.

He still looks so clean. His uniform is perfectly white, and his haircut is so neat, like he visits the same barber every week. And he's wearing glasses! He looks nerdy, but it suits him. I suddenly felt like asking him to tutor me in chemistry because that's the vibe he's giving off right now.

Plus, he smells so good—like fabric conditioner! But I'm not sniffing him on purpose, okay? It's not like I can cover my nose whenever he gets too close.

Still, I'm trying to adjust. I'm forcing myself to stay calm. I should just chill. I think I'm convincing myself that I'm getting better at hiding my feelings when I'm around my crush.

It's just that my chest keeps pounding. What if number eleven hears it? If he's the type who easily picks up on things, wouldn't he figure out how I feel about him?

What if he already knows I like him?

I know the chances of him hearing my heartbeat are low… but not zero. Especially if his ear ever ends up close to my chest! I don't even know if that'll happen, but it's better to be safe, right?

Because I'm not ready for that.

Actually, I don't even know when I'll be ready.

Maybe… that day will never come because I'm pretty sure this is one of those secrets I'll take to my grave.

What I've been doing—using him as motivation—is corny, but that's as far as I'll go. Whatever. I just don't want to overthink things because there's so much else I need to focus on right now, like school, volleyball, and my future.

I saw number eleven shake his head. "It's my treat."

"There you go again, MVP. How much is it?"

"Don't worry about it, Kai."

"Tsk," I said, pulling out 500 pesos from my wallet.

"I won’t accept that."

"But I’m paying!" I insisted, but he just shook his head again. "Didn’t you say you’d only treat us if we won? We lost, didn’t we?"

"I don’t remember saying that," he smirked.

My mouth dropped open. "Hey! You did say that! Do you want a screenshot?"

"Go ahead," he said smugly.

"You’re so stubborn, MVP," I frowned.

He laughed. I was momentarily stunned, and quickly distracted myself by eating my ice cream. Damn. It’s still different when I hear his laugh in person. It’s music to my ears.

"You can pay me back by winning the semifinals," he said.

I looked at number eleven again. He was smiling while looking at me, which made me lose focus once more. What’s wrong with me, Kai? Get it together! Is this what it feels like to have a crush for the first time?

I cleared my throat. "Wow. It’s like you’re telling me I’ll never be able to pay you back. You watched the game, didn’t you? We struggled so much against your school."

I noticed how his facial expression softened, which immediately caused my heart to race faster.

"Kai," he called my name. "You’ve been training really hard for this. I know you can do it. I’ve seen you guys play, and you’re really good. You’re actually better than you think. Just always keep in mind to execute the game plan and follow your coaches’ reminders.

Yes, there will be a lot of pressure, but don’t forget to enjoy playing."

Damn…

Is it possible to fall even harder for someone?

My mouth hung slightly open as I stared directly into number eleven’s eyes. He was looking back at me, and just like that, I felt like my heart was under attack when he smiled.

Shit… that might be the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen.

"But no matter what happens, win or lose, I’ll always be here cheering and rooting for you, okay?"

Damn it.

It’s like… I suddenly want to confess to him.

Should I confess?

But what if he suddenly… gets mad? What if he stops talking to me afterward? What if… he distances himself from me?

That’s when I looked away. Tsk. That’s all it took for reality to hit me again. I already saw the rainbow earlier, but then it got cloudy, and suddenly it started raining.

I focused my attention on my ice cream.

"Your teammates will really get mad at you if they find out you're cheering for us."

I don't know, but I feel like I've said that to him before. I just can't remember.

"I already told you before, right? I'd get in even more trouble if I didn't cheer for you."

We locked eyes again. He smiled, and I fell again. Déjà vu.

"Guys, this is do-or-die! If we lose here, that's it. No second chances. Let's fight for Game 3, okay? Don't let them score easily. They need to work hard for every point, understood?"

The arena was packed today for Game 2 of the semifinals. We could barely hear Coach over the noise from both schools' supporters.

"Yes, Coach!"

"Creston!"

"U!"

I was already nervous. By the end of today, there would only be two possible outcomes: either Westmore advances to the finals and faces Easton, who won earlier against Northville, or Creston gets another chance to make it to the finals in this year's off-season tournament.

The names of the starting players from both schools were called, and not long after, the game began. Unfortunately, number eleven couldn't watch because he had class.

We huddled briefly on the court as a team. Jerome gave us some quick reminders.

"Just enjoy this, alright?"

"Yes, Captain!"

One of our goals for today's match—aside from winning, of course—was to avoid letting Westmore dominate too much. If we could keep the scores close, we'd do that. But ideally, we wanted to take the set.

The game started with Jerome serving an ace against Westmore's open spiker. The crowd erupted, and we were thrilled—it was a good sign that we could pull this off. The game continued, and for some reason, we quickly sensed that Westmore's spikers were having an off-game. They had decent reception and sets, but if it wasn't an attack error, we weren't letting their balls land easily either.

That's where we took advantage.

And damn… the ball really is round! I couldn't believe how we almost never lost momentum. Who would've thought we'd lead 2 sets to 1 against Westmore University?! Against their Team A minus number eleven?!

Before I knew it, Creston was at match point!

Is this real?! Just one more point, and we win? Though, technically, it's not the finals yet, but at least we forced a Game 3!

"Lorenzo serving for the match!"

The entire arena roared, especially Creston's side. I glanced at Jerome, whose face was dead serious as he prepared to serve. When the referee blew the whistle, he immediately jumped and served.

And boom! Another service ace!

"Creston University wins Game 2!"

I couldn't hold back my scream when it was announced. I felt my teammates rushing onto the court to celebrate with us. There's going to be a Game 3! Creston is still alive!

The whole team was ecstatic, even as we headed to the dugout. Usually, I'd shower right away since my teammates take forever, but I went to check my phone first.

I just wanted to brag to number eleven that we won! But when I opened Instagram, he had already messaged me. Wow, he beat me to it!

roenalejo11: Congratulations, Kai! I knew you'd win.

kaireyes: I was about to message you! Thank you! Hehe. Wait, how did you find out? Did you watch the illegal livestream again, huh?

roenalejo11: 🤭

kaireyes: You're in trouble, MVP! Hahahaha! Were your classes done when you watched? Don't tell me you weren't listening to your professor?

roenalejo11: Haha, of course not. Though, I only managed to watch the latter part of Set 4.

kaireyes: But your classes are done for the day, right?

roenalejo11: Yeah. Actually, I'm in the arena's parking lot right now.

My eyes widened. Suddenly, it hit me—I saw him in Creston's parking lot earlier.

kaireyes: Wait, really? Why are you at the arena?

roenalejo11: I was hoping to see you.

Shit… there goes my heart again! I immediately felt my face heat up. Please don't tell me I'm blushing! I turned around so my teammates wouldn't see me. Those guys are such teasers!

But why does he want to see me?

Did we have plans that I forgot about?

But it's impossible for me to forget something like that if we did.

roenalejo11: Are you, by any chance, still here?

I glanced at my teammates, who were busy on their phones. Some were already showering. I looked for Jerome, but it seemed like he was already in the bathroom, so I took the chance to slip out of the dugout quietly.

It didn’t take me long to reach the arena’s parking lot. It’s huge, but for some inexplicable reason, my eyes immediately found number eleven.

He was leaning against his car, seriously focused on his phone. He wasn’t in uniform today—just a white shirt and jeans—but he still had that strong presence.

I glanced around to make sure no one was nearby, then slowly approached him.

"Hey," I said.

I laughed when he looked startled by my sudden appearance. But after a moment, he smiled and stepped closer. I instinctively backed away slightly.

"I still smell like sweat," I said.

"Oh," he replied. "It’s okay," he said, stepping closer again.

Shit, heart, calm down!

"Hi," he said. "Congratulations again on your win."

"T-thank you. Why are you here, anyway? The game’s over. You’re pretty late."

"I told you. I was hoping to see you," he answered directly, his gaze steady.

I blinked. Shit… hearing that in person is so different from reading it in a DM! I felt weak again!

"And since you’re still here, I want to give you something," he added, opening the passenger door of his car.

I frowned while waiting for him to grab something.

And when I saw what it was, my heart went wild again.

"Your reward for your hard work," he said, handing me a bouquet that I initially thought was flowers.

Turns out, it was a bouquet of chocolates.

21

I walked back to the dugout in a daze, holding the bouquet of chocolates number eleven had given me. I only realized I was still on Earth whenever I bumped into someone while walking. I apologized a few times, but it felt like I wasn't fully present because I kept drifting off into my thoughts.

But who wouldn't be lost in their own world when the person you like unexpectedly gives you a bouquet of one of your favorite things?

I still couldn't believe it.

Number eleven gave me chocolates.

With an S! Plural! Not just one, but multiple chocolates!

And not just any chocolates—a beautifully arranged bouquet of chocolates!

I looked at it again. My mouth almost hurt from smiling so much because I couldn't stop grinning. Damn… it felt like I was falling for someone all over again. When was the last time that happened? I couldn't even remember.

You really are something else, MVP.

"Chill, Kai," I whispered to myself. "Your heart." I took a deep breath. He's really not healthy for me—literally and mentally. Literally, because he gave me so many chocolates, and I don't even know how I'll finish them all. Mentally… because I'm starting to overthink.

And I don't want to overthink things, right? But I couldn't help it.

Because… why did he give me this?

I know we're friends, even though we never explicitly said it. I'd probably hit him if we weren't friends by now, given everything. But at the same time, I can't help but wonder: is this how he treats all his friends? Does he give bouquets of chocolates to others too? Is this one of the perks of being his friend?

Maybe… you know… I'm not the first person he's treated like this.

He said he's friends with Nica Guerrero too.

Did she also receive chocolates from number eleven? Did he take her to Tanay? Did he treat her to ice cream? Did he send her food and iced coffee sometimes? Did he encourage her with kind words when she doubted herself?

Is number eleven this kind to her too?

Because… maybe I'm the only one thinking I'm… special.

Wait.

Why am I even assuming I'd be treated specially by number eleven? Am I hoping that… we feel the same way?

That he likes me too?

I quickly shook my head. I got chills just thinking about what was running through my mind. Damn, Kaizen! He just gave you chocolates, and already your illusions are spiraling? Can't he just be like that naturally? And hello, it's the 21st century. You can give chocolates to friends, right? Yes, exactly. That's allowed, so I shouldn't read too much into it, even if my mind is full of dirty thoughts.

So calm down, Kai.

It's impossible for him to like me. Number eleven is just my motivation. Just a happy crush…

Is it really impossible?

Yes, it's impossible!

Or maybe I'm just in denial, even though it's obvious he might like me too?

Does he like me? Is that even possible? I mean, I really like him, but… no! It's impossible!

Yes, Kai. It's possible. He gave you chocolates, didn't he? Would you give a bouquet of chocolates, for example, to Jerome? No, right? Unless you like him—

I ruffled my hair. Ugh, whatever! Please, self, stop giving me false hope!

Tsk. This is why I hate overthinking.

"Hey, what's that? Chocolates?" Jerome greeted me as I entered the dugout. "Guys, Kai has chocolates!"

My teammates quickly gathered around me. I hugged the chocolates protectively because they might try to take some.

It's not that I'm stingy, but these were from number eleven, right? A gift from my *friend*.

Only I should consume these.

"Ay, Kai's being so stingy! There's so much, you should share!"

Vince laughed. "Who gave them to you, Kai? Your boo?"

"No. It's from, uh, a fan," I lied.

"What?!" they all said in unison.

"Yeah, really!"

Jerome burst out laughing. We locked eyes, and he smirked like he knew something I didn't.

"Wow, what a dedicated fan, Kai! So much effort!"

"Idiot," I muttered, breaking away from them. I placed the chocolates in a corner and turned to glare at them. "I'm counting these, okay? If anything goes missing, you're all in trouble."

"Damn, Kai's scary when he threatens! Like an angry keychain!" Kiko joked, and they all started laughing.

I ignored them and headed straight to the shower. Damn, I just realized I faced number eleven without even showering first. How embarrassing!

Over the next two days, I focused more on schoolwork and training. I kept myself busy so I wouldn't think too much. Besides, Game 3 of the semifinals was approaching. That's where my focus should be. It's hard when my brain keeps overthinking like this.

But how can I stop overthinking when the first thing that greets me in the morning is…

roenalejo11: Good morning, Kai.

I sighed.

I tried to convince myself that it's normal for number eleven to greet a friend with a "good morning." I also assumed he probably greeted others this morning too.

Because as much as I want to believe that number eleven has feelings for me, the bigger possibility is… this is just how he is with everyone. It feels nice to be flattered, but… I know I'll only end up hurting myself in the long run if these feelings grow deeper and turn out to be unrequited.

Because nothing hurts more than one-sided affection.

roenalejo11: Have you eaten yet?

Then he followed it up with a picture of his overnight oatmeal. That's what he had for breakfast today.

See? Confusing!

Because I don't do this with my other friends! I don't randomly greet them or ask if they've eaten yet! But this number eleven… I really don't know anymore.

What should I do about this?

Should I avoid him for now to get over these feelings? Or would it be better to ask him directly what he's doing? Should I just assume things like this?

It's all because of those chocolates!

"Kai."

"Ay, number eleven!"

I jumped in surprise when Jerome suddenly appeared beside me in the cafeteria. He laughed at my reaction and sat next to me, placing the tray of food he was carrying on the table.

"You're so jumpy," he teased with a grin.

"I was just thinking about something," I replied casually. "You're early. What time is your first class?" I glanced at my wristwatch. It was only 7:30 in the morning.

"My first class isn't until 8:30," he said, taking a bite of his tapsilog. "I can guess what you're thinking about."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

His grin widened. "You're thinking about Alejo, aren't you?"

My eyes widened, and I was about to respond when I suddenly choked on my food. Jerome burst out laughing, then patted my back and handed me some water. Shit! I didn't expect that!

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"N-no—"

"Come on, Kai. I already know Alejo was the one who gave you those chocolates."

I looked at him again. Did he see that? Well, it's not like I'm scared of anyone finding out since there's nothing going on between me and number eleven. He just gave me chocolates. But in this digital age, I'd rather avoid becoming gossip material, especially for someone like number eleven.

He's not a celebrity, but he does have a large following on Instagram.

"H-How did you know?"

Jerome's eyes widened. "What?! So, he really was the one who gave them to you?!"

"H-Huh?"

"I was just guessing, Kai!"

I gaped at him, then closed my eyes in frustration. What is wrong with Jerome?! Ugh! And here I thought he was just teasing me! Bad trip!

"Idiot, what's going on between you and Alejo—"

I quickly covered his mouth. "Shh! Keep it down, Captain! Do you want the whole of Creston to hear you?"

Jerome made a peace sign, and only then did I remove my hand.

So annoying. My morning was going well because number eleven greeted me, but this team captain of ours ruined it by butting in.

"But seriously, is there something going on between you two?" he whispered.

I glared at him. "No!"

"Oh, so he's courting you?"

I was shocked at that. The thought of number eleven courting me sent my imagination into overdrive. Shit! My overactive mind is attacking again!

"Not at all!"

"Then what? Did he confess to you or something?"

"No!"

"Then what's the deal?"

"W-well, he just gave me chocolates, but that's it!"

Jerome stared at me for a while, as if he didn't believe me.

"Ah. Okay. I get it. You're not ready to talk about it yet. Fine," he shrugged and went back to eating as if nothing happened. Seriously!

"There's really nothing going on," I said, but he ignored me completely. He just kept eating. So frustrating! "We're just friends."

But the idiot still ignored me!

I was surprised when he suddenly stood up, carrying his tray of food. When I looked, he was already done eating! I thought he wasn't going to say anything else, but then he turned to me and ruffled my hair with one hand.

"Just tell me when you're ready to talk, okay?"

My lips parted. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know the right words.

"Promise, no judgment. I'm not just your team captain, Kai. I'm also your friend. If you need anything or just want someone to listen, let me know. We're in the same room anyway."

I smiled. "T-thanks."

"But honestly, Alejo seems like a good guy."

"H-Huh?"

"I've noticed him for a while now, actually. I always catch him looking at you."

I blinked at what Jerome said, my heart pounding loudly in response.

Shit…

Stop, Kai. Don't overthink this. Don't start imagining things!

"F-Friends, that's all we are…"

It was too late when I realized what I had just said. There were so many things I wanted to say, but—

I froze when my phone rang. I saw Jerome glance at it, then he smirked and looked back at me.

"Speaking of your friend, Kai. He's asking if he can call you."

22

"Creston University's starting libero, number eleven, Kaizen Reyes!"

I gave high-fives to my teammates and the coaching staff before heading straight to the court for the huddle before the first serve of the match. We could barely hear each other because of the loud cheers and shouting from the audience in the arena. Yep, Game 3 of the semifinals between Creston and Westmore is underway. And as expected, whenever Westmore plays, a huge crowd shows up. But it's still heartwarming to see that Creston's supporters are just as passionate.

I looked around at the entire arena and couldn't help but smile because the vibe feels like a championship game even though it's only the semifinals. Damn. It really is different when there's a big audience watching the game. It feels amazing.

And it's a big deal for us because here in the Philippines, women's volleyball has a much larger reach. So it's heartening to see men's volleyball slowly gaining recognition too.

But… it would've been even better if number eleven were here.

Kaizen's motivation is missing.

It's kind of sad that he can't watch live. He messaged me earlier saying he had an emergency. I couldn't help but ask what the emergency was, but he said he was fine.

He told me to just focus on the game. Then he sent me a good luck message with a selfie of him doing a fighting pose and his signature smile.

And who am I to not feel flustered by that?

I almost strangled Jerome earlier because my stomach was in knots. I'm only human, after all. Anyone would feel weak-kneed when their crush sends them a picture like that.

One of these days, I'll really ask number eleven—especially if he keeps doing things that you wouldn't normally do for a friend. I'll ask him if he's hinting at something. If there's anything going on.

If… he likes me too.

Because if he does, then… great.

But if he doesn't, damn it, I'll tell him to get a grip on himself and stop making moves that I overthink about almost every day. I'll set boundaries.

Even if he says he's not aware of what he's doing, it's still scary. Like I said, it's nice to feel flustered, but you can't just live off that fluttery feeling forever.

Sooner or later, you'll realize—you've already fallen hard.

Like right now.

"Shit!" I exclaimed as Westmore's dropball landed on our court. We all exchanged glances. Jerome shook his head, and we quickly huddled again while the opponents celebrated their point.

Just moments ago, I was thinking about falling for someone, and I didn't even anticipate that their outside spiker would simply drop the ball during that rally. It's frustrating.

This must be the third time already that we thought he was going to spike, but at the last second, he changed his mind mid-air and did a drop instead.

And the worst part? We still haven't adjusted on our side. They've been dropping balls on us since earlier, but it's like our feet are glued to the floor, and no one's picking them up.

It's frustrating for me because I'm supposed to be the most agile one on the court as the libero.

The score is 16-12. The opponents are leading. The buzzer sounded for the technical timeout. It's only the first set, but unlike in Game 2, Westmore's players are wide awake and fully energized today.

And Coach is starting to get mad.

"Guys, step up and take responsibility when the ball is close to you! So many easy balls are dropping in front of you that should've been easy pickups. Read what they're going to do! Don't just move when the ball is already on the floor."

"Yes, Coach!"

"Alright, we're receiving now, okay? Drew, Kai, let's make a good pass, alright?" Coach added, and Drew and I nodded. "We need to attack quickly. Only four meters to cover. Clear?"

"Yes, Coach!"

"Creston!"

"U!"

The game resumed… and we were struggling.

I don't know what kind of training Westmore did, but their movements are so smooth right now. Honestly, this is their true level of play. They're even more fired up because it's clear they want revenge for losing to us in Game 2.

I can feel the exhaustion setting in.

We're all starting to get frustrated.

We're receiving well. Jerome's sets are clean. Our spikers are hitting the ball. It's just that Westmore's floor defense is absolutely incredible.

We need multiple attempts just to get the ball to land on their court. And their transition plays are lightning-fast, thanks to their setter. Not only that, their blocking is also on point today.

In short, they're all in god mode!

"Good pass, Kai!"

"Kill it!" I shouted.

But Paul got blocked! I tried to cover it, but the ball flew out of bounds. What a waste!

I glanced at the scoreboard above. It's Set 3 already. The score is 24-17 in favor of number eleven's team. Just one more point, and they'll advance to the finals against Easton.

Not to be negative, but… it's impossible for us to catch up now. At this point in the game, we'd need to play perfect volleyball. And given how strong our opponents are, the chances of us pulling that off are slim.

What a shame.

This was our chance to make it to the finals.

But we couldn't fight back today.

And honestly, I'm kind of relieved that number eleven didn't watch live. It's embarrassing.

I played so poorly.

"Westmore University now at match point!"

The Westmore supporters erupted in cheers, especially when their setter scored an ace with the winning serve. After that, Jerome quickly gathered us in the middle, and the rest of our teammates joined us too.

"We'll bounce back in the battle for bronze, okay?"

No one spoke.

"Hey, what's wrong with you guys? We made it to Game 3! There's still the in-season tournament, alright? That's where we'll make our comeback. And if we still can't pull through, there's always next year. As long as we still have playing years left, we keep fighting! I'm proud of all of you. I'm proud of this team. You know that! It just wasn't our day today, but we fought hard. Smile, guys!"

We all nodded. I smiled. Thankfully, Jerome is our captain. He always pumps up the team no matter the outcome of the game. I don't know what we'd do without him as our team captain.

And he's right. There's still the battle for bronze. We have another chance to podium finish. That's what we need to prepare for.

"Good game," the opposite hitter from Westmore said with a smile as we shook hands under the net. Number thirteen was on his jersey.

"Uh, thank you. Good game to you too," I replied with a smile and gave a slight bow.

"Carlos, by the way," he introduced himself, still not letting go of my hand. I blinked. "Uhm, Kaizen."

"Nice playing against you, Kaizen," he smiled again, and I felt his firm grip on my hand before he finally let go.

"You know him?" Jerome asked, standing beside me after Carlos left.

"He introduced himself," I replied.

After that, we went to Westmore's coaching staff to bow, then headed straight to the dugout to shower. As usual, I showered first. After getting dressed, I wasn't planning to check my phone right away, but I thought number eleven might have messaged me.

And I was right—there was a DM from him. He must've already heard about the game's result.

roenalejo11: Still a good game, Kai.

kaireyes: Congrats to Westmore! Too bad we lost, hehe. Tell them to keep it up. My bet's on them again.

roenalejo11: Are you still there? Can I borrow you for a few minutes?

My eyes widened at number eleven's reply. It felt like my heart stopped for a moment. Damn, MVP really knows how to surprise me! I almost dropped my phone!

But here I go again, overthinking everything!

roenalejo11: Or are you already on your way back to Creston?

kaireyes: We're still in the dugout. Wait, don't tell me you're in the parking lot again?

roenalejo11: Haha

What the heck, he just laughed at me!

kaireyes: Seriously?

I adjusted my posture as number eleven sent a selfie of himself inside his car.

Shit, he really is in the parking lot again! I don't know why, but I suddenly remembered the bouquet of chocolates he gave me. Is he… giving me something again?

Another bouquet of chocolates? I haven't even finished the last one he gave me!

Tsk. Nothing yet, but damn, my mind is already racing!

"Captain," I called out to Jerome, who had just finished showering.

"What?" he asked, but I hesitated to speak. "What's up? Why do you look like you're about to poop yourself?" He laughed.

"Well…" I cleared my throat. "Do you think it's okay if I don't ride the bus back to Creston?"

He frowned. "Why?"

"Uh, well…" I took a deep breath. "It's because of number eleven…"

"Number eleven?" he asked, and I nodded. "Ah! Alejo, you mean—"

"Shh! Keep your voice down, Captain!"

"Sorry!" He laughed again. "So, what's up with Alejo?"

"Um…" Shit, I couldn't say it!

"Is he outside? Do you have plans?"

Jerome and I locked eyes. He smirked immediately and ruffled my hair. I was a bit surprised when he suddenly grabbed my duffel bag.

"Alright, go ahead. Go see him. I'll take care of explaining to Coach," he said, pinching my cheek.

"R-Really?"

"Yeah. We don’t have training later anyway. Just make sure you’re back before curfew, okay?"

I smiled and thanked Jerome profusely. He really is the best captain ever!

I quickly left the dugout and headed straight to the arena’s parking lot. When I got there, there were a few people around, but I immediately spotted number eleven leaning against his car.

Damn.

He always looks so fresh.

Just a simple black t-shirt and khaki pants, but he still looks so handsome. When does this guy ever look tired?

I slowly approached him. He must’ve sensed my presence because he turned toward me and flashed his signature killer smile.

Shit… we lost the game, but it feels like I won something because I get to see him.

Lord, my heart. I leave it in Your hands.

"Hi," he greeted.

I caught a whiff of his cologne as I approached. What brand is that? I hope it’s not too expensive because I plan to buy it too.

"Hello," I greeted back. "I thought you had an emergency?"

"Yeah. About that…" he said, opening the passenger seat of his car.

And as if on cue, my chest started pounding. So, I was right? He’s giving me something again? He’s taking something out!

I casually peeked to see what it was. I saw a thermal lunch box, which number eleven had even secured with a seatbelt so it wouldn’t tip over.

When he finally retrieved it, he turned to me with a shy smile, scratching the back of his neck.

MVP looks so cute! He’s so huggable, even though I know he’s too big to fit in my arms. Then I noticed his ears turning red.

Tsk. Now I feel like my ears are turning red too.

"This was the *emergency*," he said.

I frowned. "Huh?"

Instead of answering, he opened the thermal lunch box and pulled out a clear tupperware container. At first, I didn’t immediately understand what was inside. Was it food? It looked like food… food with soup—

I froze as I realized what it was.

Number eleven and I locked eyes. My lips parted, and his smile widened as if he was waiting for my reaction.

"It’s my first time cooking this, but I hope you like my version of strawberry sinigang."

23

"How is it?" Number eleven asked after I tasted the strawberry sinigang he cooked.

We were still inside his car, parked in the arena’s parking lot. I held the lunch box on my lap. I thought we’d eat somewhere else, but it seems like number eleven was too excited because he handed me a spoon right away. What a Boy Scout MVP is!

But I didn’t answer his question immediately.

I just stared at him seriously.

During those moments, so many thoughts were running through my mind. But there was one feeling that stood out above everything else.

I wanted to smile, but I held back to keep him in suspense for a bit longer. My toes were curling just to stop myself from laughing at how cute he looked right now.

His eyebrows were furrowed, and his lips were slightly parted. He was really waiting anxiously to hear what I thought of his strawberry sinigang.

So cute.

Adorable, even.

But damn, this guy really can do anything, huh… what *can’t* number eleven do?

He’s great at volleyball—season MVP, no less. He’s studying to be an engineer. And now it turns out he can cook too? It’s official. He’s one of God’s favorites.

"Oh, please stop staring and tell me. Is it… bad?" He asked worriedly when I just kept looking at him without saying a word.

But I still didn’t say anything. I just continued to stare at him, keeping a straight face. Inside, I was already laughing so hard, but number eleven was just too cute. He looked like someone defending their thesis, knowing full well that their entire paper might get sent back for revisions.

But honestly… this MVP is something else.

His strawberry sinigang was delicious. Like, really good! It wasn’t exactly like my mom’s recipe, but it still gave me that same comforting feeling, as if I were back home in Baguio. I suddenly missed it. I had only gone home recently, but it felt like it had been ages.

But more than the taste of number eleven’s sinigang, what made me want to keep staring at him was the fact that he cooked this for me… the fact that he thought to do this and actually came here… it felt amazing. There was the kilig (fluttery feeling), but more than that, I felt pure joy because I didn’t expect any of this today.

So yeah, I’ve accepted it now.

I like him, yes, but now? I *really* like him.

To the point that… I want to tell him.

Regardless of whether or not he feels the same way. Honestly, I don't even care anymore if I'm the only one with feelings. I just want to tell him that I like him.
But… I'll admit, I'm still hoping, somehow, that he likes me too. Because if he doesn't, then why can't he look at me now? Why are his ears turning red? Why does he seem so panicked? Why does it feel like he's shy around me right now?

Am I assuming too much? Can I really be blamed?

Just thinking that number eleven might like me back already makes me so happy. It's cheesy, but it feels like I've won a championship.

Should I ask him?

Yes! So we can finally clear things up once and for all!

Or should I confess first?

Are you sure, Kai? Or are you just getting carried away by your emotions right now?

Tsk. Yeah, right? Is it okay to do this? Is this the right timing? Wait, is there even a "right" time to confess? Is there a perfect place to confess your feelings? And if I do confess, am I ready for his reaction?

Because there are only two possible outcomes here. Either I'll go back to the dorm smiling, or I'll end up going to sleep tonight heartbroken.

Shit… this is nerve-wracking!

I don't even know what to do anymore!

"Uhm, thank you for the sinigang," I said. There were so many questions and thoughts in my head, but that's what I ended up saying first.

Number eleven glanced at me, but his ears were still red. Damn, I'm starting to think he's feeling kilig too, which is why they're turning red. It's his fault I'm overthinking this now, anyway. I'm seeing all the signs, hello!

Alright, Kai, fight for this.

"You can relax now because it's delicious. It tastes like Baguio. I mean, it feels like I'm in Baguio again," I added quickly, laughing when it seemed like a weight had been lifted off number eleven's shoulders. "You were nervous, huh?"

He sighed, then smiled and shook his head. So handsome!

"Don't do that, please," he said.

"Sorry," I laughed even harder and went back to eating. Seriously. I think I've found a new second favorite sinigang. Of course, my mom's is still my number one favorite.

"Does it... taste like your mom's?"

"Honestly? No."

"Oh," he blinked.

"But yours is delicious too! Didn’t I say that before? My mom uses pork. And her sinigang’s broth is thicker when she cooks it. Yours is salmon, right? Wait, this is salmon, isn’t it?"
He nodded.

"But no joke, it’s really good. Where did you learn to cook?"

He smiled. "From my dad."

"Wow! In my family, I’m just the eater. I tried cooking once, but I almost burned the house down, so I never attempted it again," I laughed. "But you’re really good. You’re ready to get married," I blurted out.

"Married?"

We looked at each other, and before I could overthink, I focused back on the sinigang. I took a sip of the broth. "B-But seriously, it’s really good," I said, even though I’d probably already said the word "delicious" a hundred times today. "If I were to rate this, it’s a 9 out of 10!"

"Really?"

"Yeah. Promise! Didn’t you taste it?"

"I... actually forgot to taste it earlier."

"You didn’t taste it?" I asked in disbelief. "What? You just guessed if it was good?"

I laughed even harder when I saw how number eleven looked like he wanted to sink into his seat. The MVP is embarrassed! Meanwhile, I felt like a worm drenched in salt because I was starting to get giddy over how cute my companion was. Chill, Kai! Save some of your coolness. You’re totally falling for him!

"What if it’s too salty?"

Number eleven scratched his cheek. "Yeah. I’m sorry."

"Don’t worry, it’s fine. It’s delicious. The sourness is just right. But you should taste it, okay? Just to be sure."

"Okay. I’ll taste it next time."

"Wow! So there’s going to be a next time with sinigang?"

He smiled and playfully tapped my nose. "Of course."

I froze.

Shit. Shit!

I cleared my throat and quickly looked back at the sinigang. I subtly exhaled because my heart was pounding so hard. Damn it, I’m not ready to confess! I’m really not ready! All the confidence and bravado I had earlier? Gone, vanished!

To cover up my internal panic, I quickly scooped up some salmon belly and a strawberry from the sinigang using a spoon and held it up to number eleven’s face.

"Try it," I said, pretending to be chill.

We looked at each other again.

And his gaze shifted from my eyes to the spoon I was holding.
But I was completely caught off guard when, instead of taking the spoon to feed himself, he just opened his mouth and ate directly from the spoon I was holding! It was so unexpected!

I didn’t react immediately. I just blinked as I watched him slowly chew. Until... my gaze lingered on his lips... which, for some inexplicable reason, seemed redder now.

Damn it...

What would it feel like... to kiss those?

They look so soft...

Shit, if I kissed him now—

"Number eleven," I called out to him, but my eyes were glued to his lips, as if they were the most important thing in the world right now.

"Number eleven?" His voice sounded confused, but I just nodded.

"What’s with number eleven, Kai?"

"You."

"Huh?"

"You’re number eleven."

His lips parted, and his ears turned red again, but I didn’t pay much attention to that. I was starting to confess! This is it. While I’m still not overwhelmed by shyness, I need to tell him now!

I took a deep breath and faced him.

I looked straight into his eyes.

"Number eleven," I called him again.

"Hmm?"

This is it.

"I lo—"

I froze when I felt something warm on my lap.

When I looked down, shit, the sinigang had spilled!

24

"Sorry for the trouble," I said to number eleven as we got out of his car.

"It's okay, Kai," he just smiled.

MVP is so kind. If it were someone else, they might have gotten mad at me for spilling sinigang on their car seat. The seat cover was waterproof, and it was really my shorts that got soaked, but it was still embarrassing. Number eleven seems like the type who keeps his things spotless.

What I really wanted was to go straight to the dorm, but he insisted I change into fresh shorts first at a nearby coffee shop. Jerome had taken my duffel bag earlier, but number eleven is such a boy scout. He had an emergency bag in his car, and there were extra training shorts inside.

I couldn't even imagine how embarrassed I was earlier when he handed me his shorts—if you could even call them shorts.

I was sure they'd be too big for me.

They probably fit me more like pants.

But who am I to complain? He was being kind enough to lend them to me.

"I'll just be a minute," I said as we entered the coffee shop. Thankfully, there weren't many people inside. It was embarrassing—I smelled like salmon sinigang.

"Okay," he nodded. "Do you want anything?"

"Huh?"

"I'll order while you change."

"Oh, no, I—" I stopped myself because I realized it would be rude to the baristas if I just used the restroom without ordering anything. "Wait, did you see matcha on the menu, right?"

He slowly smiled and nodded.

Damn, that smile. It's so disarming!

"Alright. But it's on me," I said. His forehead immediately furrowed. Look at him. He really seems allergic to me treating him. "Come on, number eleven. Let me do it since you cooked sinigang for me. I'll send you the payment later since I don't have my wallet with me."

"But—"

"No more arguing!"

I didn't let him say anything else and quickly headed to the coffee shop's restroom. Thankfully, only my shorts got wet. It didn't reach my underwear.

Because I don't think I could handle it if number eleven lent me his underwear too.

"You're such an idiot, Kai," I shook my head as I saw my red reflection in the mirror. This is ridiculous! I can't take it anymore! Who knows where my mind will go next?

And as if he'd even lend me that, right? Who lends out underwear? Probably no one. Even if he said it was brand new and unused, I still wouldn't accept it.

Aside from it being super embarrassing, I'm sure we have different... uh... sizes.

Waist sizes, I mean! And I was right—the training shorts that probably only reached number eleven's thighs were already past my knees. Thankfully, they had an elastic waistband, so they weren't loose around my waist.

I'll just wash these thoroughly later.

I wonder what fabric conditioner number eleven uses. Maybe I'll ask him later.

I washed my face to freshen up and sprayed some alcohol that number eleven had handed me earlier. After that, I stepped out. I immediately looked for him but froze when I saw him talking to a girl.

And not just anyone. It was Nica Guerrero. I've only seen her on IG, but I knew it was her.

She's here too...

Number eleven was already sitting at the table. The drinks he ordered for us were there too. Meanwhile, Nica Guerrero was standing in front of him. I couldn't really hear what they were talking about, but they both looked happy because they were smiling.

What are they talking about? Are they catching up? I wanted to approach them, but my feet refused to move. I just stood there, watching them.

But then I thought, what would I even say if I approached them? It would be so awkward.

"Girl, is that the volleyball player Roen Alejo?"

I glanced at a table nearby where two female customers were sitting. Both of them were looking at number eleven and Nica Guerrero.

My lips parted when one of them took out her phone and started taking pictures of the two.

"Oh, yeah, right? He's so handsome! Should we ask for a picture?"

"Idiot! His ex-girlfriend is right there!"

"Wait, are they exes? I thought they were still together? That girl was at the finals, right?"

Ex-girlfriend?

I thought... they were just friends?

My gaze immediately shifted to Nica Guerrero. I stared at her for a while. She's beautiful. Tall. Morena. And she has a really nice smile.

Next, I looked at number eleven. My forehead automatically furrowed when I saw him flashing his signature smile.

Shit... I know that smile all too well.

That's the one he often uses when... tsk.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt a knot forming in my stomach. This time, it didn’t feel good.

Is it because of the way number eleven is smiling at Nica Guerrero right now? Because he’s showing her that signature smile too?

Is it because... I thought that smile was reserved for me, even though it’s actually his default smile for everyone?

Am I jealous?

Tsk. This is what I was talking about.

Stop assuming, Kai! You thought you were special?

Good thing I haven’t confessed yet. I should be thankful for the sinigang. It was a sign to hold off.

And why did I even think about confessing? I didn’t have to. This is the problem when you get carried away by emotions and kilig moments.

"Hey," I called out to number eleven as I approached him. He was alone now—Nica Guerrero had already left. To be honest, I waited for her to leave. I just wanted to make sure I didn’t embarrass myself in front of the two of them because my stomach suddenly felt uneasy, like it was churning inside.

"Hey," number eleven greeted me with a smile right away.

Okay. Confirmed.

It was the same smile he gave Nica Guerrero earlier.

Honestly, I felt so stupid. I wanted to punch myself because my imagination had gone way too far. This is what happens when I start developing feelings for someone—I lose the ability to think straight. No pun intended.

"Kai, you’re not receiving well," Coach said during our timeout. "Is there a problem?"

I couldn’t answer.

Shit… no matter how many times I tell myself not to overthink about number eleven and my feelings for him, I still end up doing it unconsciously. I even told myself, thank goodness I didn’t confess. But I’m still losing focus, and that’s what frustrates me the most.

I’ve been so distracted that I even forgot we still have the battle for bronze coming up. And on top of that, our finals week slipped my mind too!

This isn’t like you, Kaizen!

Please, stop thinking about number eleven for a moment!

He doesn’t like you. He’s not thinking about you. Look, he’s not even watching your game today. I don’t have the right to demand that he watches, but… but still! Tsk.

"Just friends," I muttered sarcastically. As if! It’s possible he sees her as an ex.

And is that even possible? Can you really be friends with your ex?

"Kai, you don’t have a replacement. You’re the only libero on this team. Don’t you want to podium finish?"

"I’ll bounce back, Coach," I replied, though I wasn’t even sure about what I’m doing on the court right now.

"Drew, help Kai with the receives, okay? Jerome, quick plays if the passes are good. Spikers, use your judgment. If the blocks are established, check or reset the play. Clear?"

"Yes, Coach!"

"I’ll receive properly, guys," I told the team.

Jerome ruffled my hair and gave me a thumbs-up. And because I know our captain well, I could tell he’s getting annoyed because I’ve been making him chase after second balls since earlier.

"They’re only leading by two points! Let’s catch up!"

"Creston!"

"U!"

The game continued, and I managed to recover. We pushed Game 1 against Northville to five sets. Thankfully, we won via a reverse sweep.

But I wasn’t satisfied with how I played. Lately, I’ve noticed how easily I get distracted. I need a distraction from all the things distracting me right now.

Tsk. What happened to turning him into an inspiration instead of a distraction, Kai?

Oh well.

After this off-season tournament and finals week, I’ll go back to Baguio for some self-reflection.

25

"Oh, son, what are you doing here?" Mama greeted me as soon as I entered the house.

Both she and Tita Melba were surprised to see me. Well, that was exactly what I wanted—to surprise them with my sudden return to Baguio. Mission accomplished! I even laughed because I caught them deeply engrossed in watching a Korean drama.

I gave both of them a blessing.

"Mom, it feels like you don't want to see me," I teased, pretending to frown at her.

"Of course I want to see you! I'm just surprised because you didn't even text that you were coming home. I didn't get to cook anything."

"I'm still full anyway. You can continue watching your show."

"Why did you come home, hijo? Are your classes over?" Tita Melba asked.

"It's sembreak, Tita," I replied before heading straight to my room after chatting with them for a bit.

Wow. I often come home here, but the almost 5-hour trip still takes a toll on my body. Next time, I'll really book a bus where you can lie down. It's a bit more expensive than a regular bus, but at least it's comfortable. From what I know, they even provide free pillows and blankets.

The only scary part is if there's an accident and you never wake up. Knock on wood! Thank you, Lord, for bringing me here safely.

Wow. I already miss my room. Of course, I also miss the cold weather in Baguio. What I *don't* miss is the traffic we encountered earlier when we were close to arriving. It's gotten really bad because there are so many tourists here. There's no peak season anymore—it feels like people are visiting all year round.

"Kai," Mama called out as she peeked into my room.

"Yes?"

"What do you want for ulam (viand)? Your Tita and I are going to the market later."

"Uh, anything will do."

"How about sinigang?"

I didn't answer right away. Just that word. Someone immediately came to mind when I heard "sinigang." And that person is one of the reasons why I came home today.

"I just ate that the other day. But it's up to you guys."

"Okay," Mama smiled. I thought she'd leave, but she sat at the foot of my bed instead. "How long are you staying? Your sembreak is short, right?"

"I'm going back to Manila on Tuesday," I replied. "We have enrollment already for the second semester."

Mama nodded. "Are you okay, son? Is there a problem?"

We locked eyes. I furrowed my brows and looked away casually.

Damn. It’s true what they say—parents can sense when something’s wrong with you, huh?

But is what’s going on with number eleven considered a problem?

Well, it’s my fault, honestly. Aside from the annoyingly persistent pounding in my chest whenever I talk to or spend time with number eleven, I don’t really have any other problems.

We won bronze in the off-season tournament. Easton took gold, while Westmore got silver. We even had a celebration because our team manager treated us, but I’m the only one who came home here. I survived finals week, even though I zoned out a few times during exams. I’m a bit anxious about the grades, but I feel like I passed and can enroll for the second semester.

It’s just… number eleven.

Lately, I’ve been avoiding him.

I still reply to his DMs on Instagram, but I’ve set limits for myself. How do I explain this… you know, I’m trying not to assume too much about what he says or does.

As they say, rule number one: never fall for someone who’s *straight*.

Well, it’s too late for me since I’ve already fallen. But I think this feeling will pass. As long as he doesn’t give me another bouquet of chocolates or a bowl of sinigang—I might crumble like those peanut brittle snacks they sell at Wright Park.

"No, Mom. I just missed you and this room," I smiled at her.

I wanted to tell her everything, but I didn’t want them to worry. Besides… I’m not ready to talk about what I’ve recently discovered about myself—that I’m bisexual.

Or am I? I’m not even sure if that’s the right term. I don’t know. Because aside from liking girls, I haven’t really felt this way about any other guy. Until I met number eleven.

I don’t even know what made him stand out from everyone else. But one thing’s for sure—I really like him.

I was left alone in the house when Mama and Tita Melba went out for a bit. I changed clothes and was about to rest when I noticed my off-season medal in my bag.

I took it out and hung it on the corner of our sala where I keep my other trophies and medals. Papa made that display, and he’s always so proud whenever he shows it off to our visitors.

I ended up missing my dad too. Should I call him?

But when I checked my phone, the first thing I saw was a message from number eleven. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I should open it.

Tsk. Isn’t that why I came here to Baguio—to clear my head? I didn’t want to talk to him yet.

Because I know that with just one invite from him, I’d end up saying yes and rushing back to Manila. Pretending to hesitate but ultimately giving in anyway. At least being here far away gives me an excuse—not replying or feeling guilty because I have a reason.

Enough of the guilt I felt when I made up an excuse after he invited me following our bronze medal win.

But who am I fooling?

Before I knew it, my fingers had already opened the message from number eleven. Damn it, brain!

I don't even know what to do with you, Kai.

roenalejo11: Hey. I heard you're in Baguio right now?

I just sighed.

Who could he have heard it from? Jerome? Did he ask? No one else knows I'm here except for Coach and my teammates. I didn't want to reply, but I already read the message. What's with this situation?

kaireyes: I'm just in the dorm.

As soon as I sent that, I wanted to punch myself. What kind of reply was that, Kaizen?! So embarrassing! It felt like I was being all coy and pretending.

roenalejo11: Can I video call?

That's when I really panicked.

Shit! And why is he calling? A video call, no less! What's wrong with this guy? I don't want to assume anything anymore, please, number eleven!

kaireyes: Not possible. I'm in the CR right now. Pooping.

roenalejo11: After you poop then?

kaireyes: Just kidding! But yeah, I'm home for now.

That's it. I admitted it. What's the point anyway? It seems like he already knows.

roenalejo11: I know. I still want a video call with you, though.

kaireyes: A video call, really?

roenalejo11: If that's okay. I just want to make sure you arrived in Baguio safely.

Look at this MVP! Sometimes, I think I'm not even at fault for assuming things—*he's* the one fueling all my imagination lately! So what's the point of me coming to Baguio to reflect? It feels like I wasted my bus fare!

Should I ask him to reimburse me? Tsk.

kaireyes: I wouldn't be able to reply if I hadn't arrived safely.

roenalejo11: Alright ☺

I frowned at his reply. His "alright" felt colder than Baguio's air, and he even added his favorite emoji!

What's up with you, number eleven?

I threw my phone onto my bed and buried my face in the pillow. I don't know why, but I suddenly felt my head heat up. Wait, am I annoyed? And why am I annoyed? Is it because number eleven didn't push for the video call?

Damn it.

I stood up and shook my body to calm down.

Get a grip, Kaizen! You're getting out of hand! That's why you came home—to distract your mind from that guy, even if just for a moment, right? That's what you should do! Not act like some boyfriend sulking over nothing!

"Kai, take it easy," Tita Melba said with a laugh as we were having a late lunch.

I felt embarrassed when I realized I'd already eaten three plates of rice! Shit, am I stress-eating? Wait, and why am I stressed? There's nothing to be stressed about!

"Are you really okay, son?" Mom asked.

"Uhm—" I froze when an Instagram notification suddenly popped up on my phone. My heart started pounding hard when I saw that number eleven had sent me a DM! After he just replied with "*alright*" earlier?

And for the second time that day, my fingers moved faster than my brain.

roenalejo11: Hey, Mr. Tour Guide.

kaireyes: Huh?

I panicked and stood up when he sent a selfie of himself with the swan boats of Burnham Park in the background.

26

Number eleven is here in Baguio!

What is he doing here?! Is he on vacation? Doesn't Westmore still have classes? Don't they have finals week? Or is that not a thing for them?

This is frustrating! I came home to *escape* him for a bit, and now he's here too?

The rational part of my brain tells me that Baguio isn't my property, so he has every right to come here whenever he wants.

But the irrational part whispers that he followed me here after finding out I came home!

Damn it.

My brain really overthinks things like this. At this point, aside from number eleven giving me so many questions and delusions, it's also my fault because I've been assuming way too much.

I don't know anymore!

Why don't you just ask number eleven, Kaizen, what he's really doing with you? Then it'll be over, right?

That's it!

There's no harm in asking. It's simple. The problem is whether I can handle hearing his answer. What if I've just been imagining everything? What if he doesn't actually like me? What if… I end up crying? Damn it, Kai!

But seriously, what if I don't like his answer to my question?

Oh, come on! He already followed you to Baguio! Doesn't that mean he likes you? Stop overthinking!

Ah, whatever!

I need to hear it straight from his mouth. But at the same time, I don't want to ask. It's confusing, but… well, that's just how it is!

Yep, what I'm doing right now is delaying the inevitable. I might get hurt if all of this turns out to be one-sided. But that's part of having feelings for someone, right? As they say, ignorance is bliss.

Look at me, I'm even speaking in English now!

But no, corny as it may sound, let fate take its course.

I cringed at my own thoughts. Who do you think you are, Kaizen? Just go with the flow! As long as no one gets hurt or stepped on, just go for it!

"Where are you going, Kai, and why are you in such a hurry?" Mom asked as I rushed out of the room.

Honestly, I really feel like slapping myself. It's not obvious at all that I'm head over heels for number eleven, right? I didn't even finish eating and immediately went to my room to shower after seeing his selfie… seriously, why does his skin look so smooth? It's like he doesn't have pores!

And then I even struggled to pick out what to wear!

What's wrong with me, Kai? It's just number eleven! Why do I have to overthink what to wear? Am I trying to impress him? Just stick to a t-shirt and shorts! It's not like I'm not a local of Baguio City or something.

But you saw how good number eleven looked in his hoodie in that selfie earlier, right? His vibe is so strong even in just a hoodie!

Would you be okay looking like a mess next to him, Kai?

That's why I settled on a white shirt, a dark blue hoodie, jeans, and white sneakers. Kaizen even put on cologne! And I think I gargled with mouthwash twice this morning. Like, what's gotten into me…

Tsk. This is frustrating. Why am I feeling pressured and excited at the same time? This isn't a date, Kai! You're getting ahead of yourself! You're just a tour guide today, remember that!

"The kid smells so good! Do you have a date?" Tita Melba teased with a smile.

"N-No, I just need to go somewhere," I lied.

"Alright, take care," Mom said.

"Do you need money for your date, Kai? Here, take some," Tita Melba stood up, but I quickly stopped her.

"I'm not going on a date, Tita," I said, and they just laughed at me. "I'm leaving now. I'll be back soon."

But when I arrived at Burnham Park and saw number eleven sitting there with his headphones on, I already knew I wouldn't be going home anytime soon.

Shit… I still can't believe he's really here right now.

I must've stared at him for too long because he turned to look at me. Number eleven immediately stood up, and there you go, Kai. That signature smile of his that I love so much. Tsk. He's so handsome.

It's not cholesterol that's going to kill my heart—it's him.

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my hoodie and slowly walked toward number eleven. I tried to calm my breathing. Of course, I wasn't about to let him know that I almost tripped while running here earlier.

"Hi," he greeted me.

"Hello," I replied.

We locked eyes. His smile widened, and my heart started pounding twice as fast.

I casually glanced around. The weather was beautiful today. There were so many people in Burnham Park as usual. Families were strolling, friends were laughing together, and there were couples… laying down blankets and being sweet with each other.

I cleared my throat.

"Uhm, welcome to Baguio?"

Number eleven laughed. And that's when I realized… it's okay that he's here. It's okay with me, even though I went through all the effort of coming home just to *escape* him.

Maybe… fate is finally moving.

"Thank you, Kai," he replied.

"Did you just arrive here earlier?" I asked.

"Two hours ago, I think."

We started walking around. I found out he booked a room at a nearby hotel. And he had already driven here earlier when he asked for that video call! What if I hadn't been here today? Wouldn't that have been a waste of gas for his car?

"You should've rested first. You drove such a long way," I said because even I, who was just sitting and dozing off during the trip, felt tired. How much more him, who was the one driving?

"It's alright."

"Don't you have classes anymore at Westmore?"

"Today is the last day of our final exams."

"And you came straight here?" I asked, surprised, then turned to look at him. But it seemed like a wrong move because he was already looking at me!

"Yeah."

I quickly looked away. Calm down, Kai!

"Ah… so, how many days are you planning to stay here?"

"Depends."

I looked at him again. "What do you mean, depends?"

"Depends on you."

"H-Huh?"

"When are you going back to Manila?"

"Uh, well, Tuesday?"

"Not sure?" He laughed. "Oh, you're sure. Enrollment is coming up, right?"

"Alright. Then I'll go back to Manila on Tuesday as well."

My lips parted. I wanted to say something, but my heart beat me to it. He reacted first! If it had a voice, it would've probably been screaming since earlier. Tsk!

"S-So we're going back together?"

"If that's okay with you."

"But I'll just be commuting."

Number eleven stopped walking, so I stopped too. I looked up at him, and my heart went wild again, especially when he smiled and ruffled my hair.

"The passenger seat of my car is yours, Kai."

Shit.

Damn fate. I said let it move, not explode! Not shake things up! Not swirl everything around!

And the most frustrating part? Number eleven acted like what he said was no big deal. Like he didn't just drop a bombshell while casually walking around and looking at people biking!

Doesn't he feel responsible for this kilig I'm feeling?!

I think I just froze there, rooted to the spot. Meanwhile, number eleven was completely enjoying himself, taking in the surroundings! And before I even realized it, he had already walked back over to me and grabbed my arm to pull me toward the man renting out bikes!

Focus on the bike, Kaizen!

Not on number eleven's hand currently holding your arm! "Are you okay?" He teasingly asked as we got on the bike he rented.

Did I mention that the bike he rented is the kind where *he* pedals while I just sit there? Their transaction with the bike guy was so fast! I didn't even notice because I was still out of it!

Get a grip, Kaizen! Please!

But how can I calm down when I feel like I'm being hypnotized by how cute he looks, like an excited kid biking around? He was even struggling a bit to pedal because of his long legs. I couldn't help but laugh.

MVP is so huggable!

"Where to next, Mr. Tour Guide?" He asked as we ate some scrambled eggs, which he said was his first time trying. Well, rich kid problems.

We biked around for two hours. After the first hour, I refused to just keep riding as a passenger, so I rented my own bike too. The only thing was, number eleven insisted on paying, even though I said I'd cover it. I'll remind myself later to send him the money I owe.

"Aren't you hungry yet?" I asked.

"Why? Are *you* hungry?" He smirked, throwing my question back at me.

"I mean, I already ate before coming here. What about you? You haven't had lunch yet, right?"

"I could eat," he smiled. "Where do you recommend?"

"Well, what do you feel like eating?"

"I don't know. But I'll eat whatever you suggest."

I blinked and focused on the people passing by. Look at this guy. So smooth. If only he knew the effect his words have on me… ugh, never mind.

I stood up, and number eleven did the same. I guess I'll take him to Good Taste since it's decent and affordable. Hopefully, it's not too crowded, even though I know they're always packed.

I was in the middle of suggesting places to number eleven when we both stopped because someone called my name.

"Kai?"

When I turned around, I was surprised to see Reena—my childhood friend… and someone I used to court, but she rejected me.

27

"Kai?"

"Reena?"

"Oh my god! I knew it was you, Kaizen!"

I was already surprised to see Reena here at Burnham Park, but I was even more shocked when she suddenly hugged me tightly. I just laughed and hugged her back. I didn't expect to see her here in Baguio because I thought she was studying in Cebu right now for college. Must be their sembreak too?

But my smile slowly faded when I noticed number eleven frowning as he looked at Reena and me. Actually, he was only glaring at Reena now. My childhood friend is beautiful, that's true, but I know it's not just because of that why number eleven is looking at her like that.

Am I imagining things, or is he trying to pierce through Reena's cheek with just his gaze?

Come on, Kai, stop overthinking again.

But how can I not assume when it feels like the same piercing glare he gave Reena earlier is now directed at my cheek whenever he looks at me?

"You're back here too? I missed you!" Reena said after pulling away from our hug.

I awkwardly smiled. "Uhm, yeah. It's our sembreak, so…"

"Same! I really missed you! How have you been? And how's Manila? You know, I watched your game last week. You were amazing, as always!"

"Ay, thank you," I scratched my cheek nervously.

"Hey! Why do you look so shy? Where's the Kaizen who was head over heels for me back in grade 10?"

My lips parted at her words, and I instinctively glanced at number eleven—though I immediately regretted doing so. Honestly, I had completely forgotten he was even with me!

Wasn't he already frowning earlier?

Now he's added a scowl to it!

It's the first time I've seen that expression on his face! I don't know why, but it scared me. He's always smiling around me, but now it feels like a dark aura has enveloped him.

I quickly averted my gaze from number eleven. I felt like lasers might shoot out of his eyes any second now.

"I was never *that* into you," I replied to Reena. "Fake news."

Honestly, not much has changed about my childhood friend. We were in grade 11 when her family moved to Cebu, but she's still the same. Still beautiful. Maybe she grew a little taller, but she still looks like the same Reena I met back in grade 5.

"Right? If you saw inside our room back then—"

"Hey! Let's not bring up the past," I cut her off because I could feel my whole face heating up. But she just laughed at me. Yep, she hasn't changed one bit.

"Why? Are you embarrassed? You're blushing! You still have a crush on me, don't you?" I gaped at her. "You're still as shameless as ever."

She laughed even harder. "There he is, and his audacity! The shy type doesn't suit you, Kai."

I wanted to smile, but I couldn't—not when Reena grabbed my arm and when I casually glanced at number eleven, who was now glaring intently.

Shit! Now MVP's eyes are practically burning holes into Reena's hand on my arm!

"I don't even know what to do with you," I muttered, gently pulling my arm away as I realized how out of place number eleven must feel. I need to introduce him! "Um, Reena, this is—"

"What Reena? When did you start calling me Reena?"

I frowned. "Huh?"

"It's Ree for you, Kai. It's always been Ree. Now, repeat after me. What are you saying?"

I shot her a look, but she just laughed at me again. Damn. She's still as teasing as ever. Why did I even like and court her back then?

Ah, right. Because of her smile. As some of our classmates used to say, Reena could pass as a toothpaste commercial model—

Wait.

I froze as something clicked in my mind.

Didn't everything start with number eleven's signature closed-mouth smile too?

I cleared my throat. Damn it, Kai. This isn't the time to analyze these things. Your childhood friend is here, and there's a towering figure behind you who looks like an active volcano about to erupt any second!

"Ree," I said, and Reena immediately smiled. "This is… number eleven." I paused. "I mean, Roen. Uhm, a friend."

Damn. I felt uncomfortable saying number eleven's name because I'm so used to calling him that—but I felt even more uncomfortable introducing him as just a friend.

What should I have called him instead, Kai? Boyfriend?

Of course not! Tsk! My brain is fighting me again!

I turned to look at number eleven. The scowl was gone from his face, but he was still staring seriously at Reena. I wanted to whisper to him to calm down because, come on, just look at the height difference between them.

Reena only reaches number eleven's chest, and she's probably less than half his size. What if he gets mad and swallows her whole?

I know he wouldn't do that, but still—it's better to be safe and make sure no one gets hurt.

"Number eleven," I froze again. He looked at me, and my knees started shaking at how intense his gaze was. Chill, Kai! "Uhm, this is Roen. And this is Reena, my childhood friend."

"Of course I know him! The Roen Alejo! He's famous in Cebu," Reena said before walking up to number eleven. She extended her hand for a handshake, which MVP accepted. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

I almost choked on my own saliva at number eleven's polite response. It was the complete opposite of the look on his face earlier.

"Are you a friend of Kai?"

"Yes."

Reena glanced at me for a moment, then suddenly smirked. The kind of smirk that made it seem like she knew something I didn't. I panicked. What is she going to do now?

"Just friends?"

Shit! I knew it!

"Reena—"

"What? I'm just asking! And I told you, it's Ree!" And the woman laughed! "Anyway, did Kai tell you that I was almost his girlfriend?"

I could only close my eyes at that. When I opened them, number eleven and I locked eyes immediately. I took a deep breath when I noticed his eyebrows furrowing again. Shit… as much as I find him attractive even when he's serious, all I wanted to do right now was leave with him and get away from Reena.

I don't know why, but I really don't like it when number eleven is upset.

But it seemed like Reena wasn't done yet with what she had to say. She probably planned to recount all my embarrassing moments from high school! And as she kept talking, the frown on MVP's face just got deeper and deeper!

As for me? I just wanted to teleport to Sagada to reflect in peace.

"Kai was so sweet, right? I don't know why I rejected him. Maybe because we were still immature back then?" Reena said after she went on and on about stories involving me.

And what does she mean by "immature"? That wasn't the real reason she rejected me. But that doesn't matter anymore. I understood her back then, so I moved on quickly. Still, I can't exactly explain that to number eleven because it's not my story to tell.

Number eleven didn't respond.

Honestly, while Reena was telling her stories, he didn't even speak or react. Well, does his serious face count as a reaction? I couldn't figure out if he was angry, annoyed, or just not in the mood.

Meanwhile, he was so cheerful earlier after our bike ride…

"Oh, right! Can we take a picture?" Reena asked number eleven.

"Uh, I'll take the picture of you two—"

"No, Kai. What I meant was, I want a picture with you, and Roen can take the photo of the two of us," she cut me off, looking back at number eleven. "Is that okay?"

I could only gape at her.

Reena really knows how to work things! Now MVP is reduced to being a photographer!

"Do you want a jump shot too?" I sarcastically asked after number eleven took a few shots of us. I felt like I was about to explode because I couldn't even smile properly.

How could I smile when MVP was glaring at us like that?!

Yep, it's official. Mt. Roen Eleven is about to erupt any second now!

"Can we?" I immediately shook my head, and Reena laughed. "So, are you touring Roen around here? You're such a nice friend, Kai! Where are you guys going next? Why don't you tour me around too?"

I couldn't help but grimace. "We're going to eat," I replied, ignoring the teasing tone in her voice. She's really going to get it from me later if number eleven weren't here.

"Oh! Where? Can I join?"

My lips parted in disbelief. Reena smirked, clearly thinking of something mischievous. And as for number eleven… well, his expression was unreadable.

Shit… this day feels like it's never going to end.

28

"There are so many people," I said as we finally got inside Good Taste Restaurant.

Actually, we almost went to another restaurant when we saw the line outside. But Reena insisted on eating here because she said it's been a while since she last ate at this place. And since I'm touring number eleven around and he seemed willing to wait, I agreed. And yes, Reena ended up joining us.

Would it be wrong of me to feel a little annoyed that she tagged along? I mean, she practically told number eleven my entire high school life story! She was just moments away from broadcasting even my elementary school moments.

But how could I have refused? That would've been rude, right? Even though it felt like number eleven was glaring daggers at her.

I kept telling myself that MVP is probably just annoyed with Reena. I didn't want to overthink his actions because for sure, I'd end up obsessing about it for the rest of the day.

The thing is, tsk, it feels like my childhood friend has some other plan in mind.

"Kai," number eleven called out to me.

I turned to look at him. His brow was still slightly furrowed. "What?" I asked.

But I didn't expect what he did next. My chest started pounding when he suddenly pulled my chair closer to him. And not just that! He leaned in toward my ear! I thought he was going to say something dramatic, but he just whispered that he was going to the restroom! Every hair on my body stood on end when I felt his breath against my ear.

I immediately felt my whole face heat up. I didn't know where to look because number eleven did all of that in front of Reena!

"What was that, Kai?"

I shot a glare at Reena, who was already smirking. Tsk. Of course, she reacted the moment number eleven left. I knew it! She noticed. It's not obvious, but this girl is observant.

"Huh?" I tried to play dumb.

Reena smirked even more. "You know what I mean."

I focused on looking at the menu. But no matter what I read, I couldn't understand a single thing! Calm down, Kai!

"I don't know what you're talking about," I muttered.

But it seemed like nothing could stop her. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her seat, still staring at me as if she had uncovered something I should also know but was refusing to acknowledge.

Or am I just overthinking again?

"I know *the* look when I see one, Kai."

"What are you talking about now? Since when did you become so mysterious with your words?" She laughed. "OMG! Do you think being mysterious suits me? I've been trying it lately."

"Not really. You look weird."

But she laughed even harder. "You're being so KJ (kulit at joke) today, huh?" she teased, and I just rolled my eyes. "But seriously, what's going on between you two?"

I froze again. Chill, Kaizen. It's not like there's actually anything going on between me and number eleven. It's not like there ever will be. Tsk.

"Between the two of us?"

"For me, being mysterious doesn't suit you. For you, being innocent doesn't suit you either."

I took a deep breath. I was already regretting letting Reena join us. She knows too much! I didn't want to overthink, but it seems like overthinking won't leave me alone!

I didn't respond. Just keep looking at the menu, Kai!

"Oh, c'mon! It's just the two of us here, Kai. I know you feel it too. I don't know about you—it's been years since we last saw each other—but I've been in that situation before. Remember back when you were courting me? Remember Kiesha? The reason why I rejected you?"

Reena and I locked eyes, but I still didn't say anything. But I remembered everything that happened back in grade 10.

How Reena told me we couldn't be together because… she liked girls too.

"I'm actually nervous being here with you two. My gosh, I don't know if you noticed, but Roen almost glared a hole through me during our entire conversation! If looks could kill, I'd be dead on the spot. I wouldn't even make it back to Cebu!"

And she laughed!

"That's exactly how I was with Kiesha. Whenever someone talked to her—regardless of gender—I'd get insanely jealous. At first, I didn't understand what it meant, but I realized it later on. I already liked her. That's why I was so heartbroken when I found out she had a boyfriend."

I still didn't say anything.

I mean, I wanted to respond, but I thought about it—if it's true that number eleven likes me—if it's true, that is—do I even have the right to confirm that to someone else when he hasn't said anything to me yet?

Like I said, just like how Reena came out to me back then, this is number eleven's story to tell, not mine.

That's why I can't bring myself to ask, even though I really, really want to know for my own peace of mind.

I don't know, but situations like this are different. I realized it's not like with straight people, where one question about whether they like you gets you an immediate answer. Yes or no, and that's it.

But for people who are just starting to figure themselves out—aside from yes or no, there are follow-up questions about who they really are.

Someone else might ask those questions. Or maybe they'll ask themselves.

As for me? The moment I admitted to myself that I like Roen Alejo, I already accepted that I'm not straight—that I'm bisexual.

That I’m romantically attracted to both women and men.

At the same time, I considered that maybe number eleven isn’t in the same situation. Maybe… he’s still confused. Maybe this is the first time he’s felt this way. Maybe he’s struggling to express his feelings. Maybe he still has a lot of questions about himself that only he can find the answers to.

And I don’t want to pressure him.

Even though sometimes, I go crazy over the things he says and does to me.

Even though I overthink everything.

Even though there’s a chance this might all just be in my head.

I’m still at the stage where I’m overwhelmed. Where I’m panicking but, at the same time, I’m sure of my feelings. But like I said, everyone’s experiences with these things are different.

"But Kai, just in case he confesses to you, does he have a chance?"

Reena and I locked eyes again.

And there goes my imagination running wild! Tsk. Just thinking about number eleven confessing made my heart race like crazy. What more if he actually asks me if he has a chance?

Shit! Why am I getting nervous even though it hasn’t even happened yet? And why am I getting excited too? Because I know I wouldn’t hesitate anymore and would immediately say *yes, I do*?

Woah, Kai! Get a grip!

Yes, I do?! Where did that come from? You idiot!

Your mind really races when it comes to number eleven, huh? Tsk!

I cleared my throat. My lips parted, but for some reason, no words came out. Frustrating. So I just looked away before I could blurt out what I was thinking earlier.

"It’s okay, Kai. But if you need someone to talk to, I’m here, alright? I already gave you my new number. Just message me anytime. I’ll reply right away if I’m not busy."

I looked at Reena again when she suddenly stood up. I was surprised when she slung her bag over her shoulder.

"Where are you going? You haven’t even ordered yet," I said, standing up as well.

"I’ll leave you two alone. Roen might actually punch me if I stay any longer. Just tell him I left ahead, okay?"

"Reena—"

"I told you! It’s Ree! You’re driving me crazy, Kai!" She laughed and walked closer to me. I panicked when she suddenly kissed me on the cheek. I immediately looked around to see if number eleven was back yet. Thankfully, he wasn’t! I heard Reena laugh when she saw my reaction. "It’s so good to see you again, Kaizen. Good luck in the next season. No injuries, please."

I blinked. "T-Thank you. But aren’t you going to eat first? Let me treat you."

"No need. So Roen can get his act together," she teased, patting my cheek before leaving.
I didn't stop her. I was left there, still a bit disoriented from everything that happened and what we talked about. That woman… I'll probably message her later when I get home.

"Kai." I almost jumped in surprise when number eleven tapped my shoulder. I didn't even notice he was back!

"Hey," I said.

"Where's your friend?"

"Uh, she left already. She said she had an emergency."

Number eleven nodded and sat back down beside me.

I don't know why, but things suddenly felt awkward. This is all Reena's fault! She put so many thoughts into my head!

And number eleven was so quiet.

Even after we finished ordering and our food arrived, he didn't say anything. It was like he was lost in deep thought. I tried to start a conversation, and he responded, but for some reason, I couldn't keep the flow going.

By the time we finished eating and left the restaurant, we were still silent.

What's going on?

Oh well, whatever—

"Kai."

I froze when he suddenly called my name. I stopped walking and turned to look at him. As soon as our eyes met, I immediately felt the familiar pounding in my chest.

I didn't say anything. I just looked at him.

"I… just want to say sorry."

"For what?"

"I…" He cleared his throat. "I just… earlier… ah, fuck," he muttered under his breath, but I still heard it.

And I don't know why, but I ended up laughing at how he looked, especially when his ears started turning red. He looked like a kid apologizing to their parents for getting caught doing something silly. MVP is so cute.

But if what I'm thinking now is the reason why he's apologizing, it's okay with me if he's not ready to say it yet. Honestly, he doesn't even need to apologize because there's nothing to apologize for. I understand him. I completely understand.

I'll wait until he's ready.

I'm here anyway. I'm not going anywhere.

"It’s nothing," I replied and smiled at him. "Shall we go? There are still a lot of places to visit."

His lips parted as he continued to look at me. This time, I didn’t look away. After a moment, the tension softened in number eleven’s expression, and he finally smiled back at me.

29

"Is it tasty?" I asked number eleven as he was eating the odeng we bought here at the Night Market.

I furrowed my brow when he shook his head. The way he shook his head made it seem like he was regretting what he was eating right now. But his cheeks were full, like a well-fed kid.

"Why are you still eating it then?"

He suddenly smiled while chewing. "Just kidding."

I just shook my head. "What a waste. I was planning to treat you to chicken skin if you didn’t like that."

"Don’t eat those, Kai. They’re too oily."

"Hey, they’re delicious!"

"Still unhealthy."

"I’m still buying some. Don’t ask for any later, okay?"

Number eleven laughed and reached for my takoyaki with his toothpick. I let him because he said it was his first time eating takoyaki that wasn’t from Japan.

Rich kid problems.

We were just sitting here behind the takoyaki stall, eating all the random things I bought. I think I got a bit too excited because I ended up buying a lot.

But I didn’t care if number eleven thought I was greedy because this is my first time back at the Night Market in a while, you know? And speaking of the Night Market, wow, there are so many people! Especially over by the clothing stalls and other random shops. Number eleven looked funny earlier too, like a lost child looking around everywhere.

And guess who held onto my shoulder while we were walking so we wouldn’t get separated?

Yeah, okay. I’ll admit it—I was kilig. Tsk.

I know what he meant by that, alright? But it’s my brain’s fault! It’s a combination of delusions, illusions, and an overactive imagination!

And speaking of my companion now, who’s busy watching the crowd—he’s back to being cool and smiling like the usual number eleven.

Thank goodness.

Because I don’t want him to be upset or quiet anymore.

I made a mental note not to make him feel bad again in the future because it’s actually kind of scary.

He should only be serious on the court.

But hopefully, he won't be too serious when Creston is his opponent.

"Tired?" I asked when I saw him yawn.
He just smiled at me, so I sped up my eating. This MVP, seriously. Is he too shy to admit he's tired? He must be exhausted. Who wouldn't be after driving 5 hours to get here and not even resting yet?

Plus, we went to so many places earlier. I hired a taxi driver to take us around the city proper so we could get to the tourist spots faster. We went to the Botanical Garden, Wright Park, The Mansion (which we couldn't enter), and Diplomat Hotel (which was also closed because it's apparently dangerous inside).

Number eleven even looked a little sad because he didn't see any ghosts. I don't know what to do with this MVP.

Maybe we'll visit the other places tomorrow. I'm excited for the Strawberry Farm because you can pick fresh strawberries there—though of course, it's not free. It's been a long time since I last went there, and it'll be nice to bring back souvenirs for Coach and my teammates.

And since it's Sunday tomorrow, a section of Session Road will be closed for chalk art. I'm excited to show that to number eleven…

…number eleven, who's already fallen asleep beside me!

I wanted to wake him up, but MVP really looked super tired. Poor guy. Why didn't he just say he wanted to rest earlier?

I panicked earlier when he almost fell over! Good thing I quickly caught his head with my shoulder.

Though that might've been a bad move because my heart started racing again.

Hey! Heart! Calm down! If you keep acting up, I'll eat a ton of chicken skin and grilled balut to clog your arteries with grease! You want that?

But when have I ever won against my heart?

When has my heart ever listened to me?

"Number eleven," I whispered, but he didn't wake up. His head just rested on my shoulder.

I hope he doesn't get a stiff neck from this position. He's so tall, and he's leaning on me, who's much smaller compared to him. But of course, I adjusted. I slightly raised my shoulder, even though his head was already heavy. He's lucky he's handsome.

I ended up smelling his hair. Seriously, it still smelled good even after being outside all day. Even though we've been surrounded by food smells here at the Night Market. What shampoo does he use?

I also noticed the sharpness of his nose, his eyelashes, and how smooth his face was.

Does he have a skincare routine?

As for me, whatever soap I use for my body, sometimes I use it on my face too. So far, it's effective because I don't get pimples often. Or maybe it's just not in our genes? I don't know.

The cold night breeze blew.

More people were gathering even though it was already late. I started feeling a bit awkward, but I let it go. Besides, I thought, this moment might not happen again.

Number eleven leaning on me.
How close he is to me.

It’s making me feel kilig.

It feels nice.

Hey, Kaizen, your smile… go ahead, keep smiling. But tone it down a bit because people might think you’re weird if they see you grinning like that.

So, to distract myself from smiling like I’m up to something, I fiddled with my phone. Scrolled through social media a bit, reacted to some posts from online friends, and messaged Mom to say I’d be home late. She just asked who I was with. I said, a friend. Tsk. Why does it bother me that I introduced number eleven as just a friend?

I’m lucky enough that one of the rising stars of men’s volleyball in the Philippines is my friend.

And he’s with me here in Baguio right now! Isn’t that something?

"Hey, guys, let’s take a picture!"

"A picture? Is this your first time in Baguio, sis?"

"Gaga! It really is my first time!"

I glanced at a group of friends passing by, laughing and joking around. They stopped for a moment to take a picture.

I don’t know why, but I looked back at number eleven, who was still sound asleep. A little while later, I took out my phone again and opened the front camera.

Just one picture with number eleven while he’s sleeping…

But somehow, it turned into five.

And I almost jumped in shock because on the sixth shot, I realized he was awake and looking straight at the camera!

Shit! He caught me taking selfies with him!

"Oh, sorry—" I said, quickly closing the camera app, but I froze when number eleven suddenly grabbed my phone and took a picture of the two of us himself!

He even put his arm around me!

In my surprise, I ended up looking dumb in the picture, while number eleven looked handsome with his signature smile. Tsk. Even in a stolen shot, he still looks good. So unfair, especially for people who aren’t photogenic.

"Send it to me," he said, as if he wasn’t just woken up.

"I don’t want to. I’ll delete this. Look at my face!"

"Yeah. I’m looking at it, and you look cute."

I blinked and quickly looked away from him. My face heated up, and to hide it, I stood up and pretended to be nonchalant as I invited him to head home. Not that I was bringing him to *our* house! I mean, he’s going back to his hotel. As for me, I’m heading home to my place. Tsk!

"Let’s go," I said, trying to act casual. "It’s getting late."

He stood up too and smiled at me. "Shall we head home?"

Shit… he actually said exactly what I was thinking just moments ago! Don’t do that, MVP! Don’t tempt me to really bring you home!

MVP even argued with me when I said I’d drop him off at his hotel first, and then I’d just take a taxi home. He insisted on driving me home instead, even though it was obvious he’d pass out the moment he hit the bed.

So stubborn! But luckily, I won. We got to his hotel pretty quickly anyway.

"Rest well," I said as we got out of the taxi.

He nodded and smiled. "Thank you for today, Kai."

I smiled back. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yeah. Thanks to my tour guide."

"I’ll see you again tomorrow at Burnham. What do you want to visit first? I suggest the Strawberry Farm—" I suddenly froze, my eyes widening, when number eleven suddenly hugged me.

At first, it didn’t fully register in my mind. But when I realized I was now trapped in his arms, my knees suddenly felt weak.

And my heart… it felt like it was about to explode.

Shit… number eleven is hugging me!

"Thank you, Kai," he whispered.

"W-You’re welcome," I whispered back, and before I knew it, I found myself hugging him back around his waist.

Shit.

Is this real?

The strong wind blew, but we just stayed like that—him hugging me, and me… well, I don’t know anymore. I stopped caring. Whatever happens, let him feel how fast and hard my chest is pounding. All I know right now is that the coldness of the night disappeared. The warmth I felt from his hug overwhelmed me.

Damn. Why am I suddenly seeing rainbows?

Wait, where did the rainbow come from?

Is there a rainbow even though it’s nighttime?

Slowly, the rainbow faded from my vision as number eleven gently pulled away from the hug. He smiled as our eyes met. Meanwhile, my chest wouldn’t stop pounding.
I’m definitely not going to sleep anytime soon tonight. This moment will replay in my mind over and over! Ugh, I might even be late tomorrow because of this—

"I’ll just rest all day tomorrow," he said, interrupting my thoughts.

"H-Huh? Why?"

"So you can rest too."

"But there are still so many places you haven’t visited."

"It’s okay. We still have Monday to visit those places. You’re still going to tour me, right?"

"I’ve already paid for Monday."

I was surprised when number eleven suddenly took out his wallet.

"How much?"

I gaped at him. MVP really is something else!

"How much are you talking about!" I said, and he just laughed. Of course, he has a lot of money. "I’ll go ahead first. My mom’s probably looking for me already."

"Alright. Please message me when you get home."

"Okay."

"Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you home?"

I just shook my head and flagged down a passing taxi. Who knows, if I agreed to let him drive me home, I might end up not letting him go back to his place.

30

Sunday passed by so slowly. I don't know if he's teasing me or what, but it was effective. I was extremely bored because I had nothing to do since number eleven said he'd just rest the entire day.

I really wanted to show him the chalk art at Session Road.

What is number eleven doing right now?

Obviously, Kai, he's resting. But couldn't he at least check his phone while resting? Tsk. Am I being too clingy here? I sent him a DM, but he hasn't read it yet.

Is he still asleep?

You tired him out last night, Kai.

I just closed my eyes and chugged my coffee even though it was still steaming hot. I burned my tongue, but that wasn't enough to stop my brain from overthinking nonsense.

Get a grip, Kaizen.

The things you're thinking about…

If number eleven is eating right now, I'm sure he's already choking on his food.

"Kai, how was your date yesterday?" Tita Melba asked with a smile while we were having breakfast.

Badtrip. I think I'm the one choking here!

"That wasn't a date, Tita," I replied.

"Oh please! That's exactly what I used to do when I was young. Saying it's not a date, but secretly meeting up with one of my suitors. You can even ask your mom."

I just pouted and continued eating my pandesal. If I were still in high school now, what we did with number eleven would probably count as a date. Even if only I know about it. But things are different now. I already know the difference between reality and delusion.

And speaking of reality, damn, I can still feel number eleven's hug from that night. It really happened, right? I even asked the taxi driver if I really rode in his taxi, and he said yes. That's when it finally sank in—number eleven hugged me.

That's also why I slept so soundly last night.

Kaizen fell asleep smiling. Tsk. So cheesy.

"Who was that friend you were with yesterday, Kai?" Mom asked.

I blinked. "Uh, Roen."

"Who's Roen?"

"Uh, remember the finals game we watched on TV during my last visit here? The one wearing the same jersey number as me from Westmore University."

Mom thought for a moment. "Ah! The one who showed off his girlfriend in the audience?"

My brows furrowed automatically. "She's not his girlfriend."

"Is that so? But he's your friend? Is he here in Baguio?"

"Yes. He asked if I could show him around, so…"

"A guy?" Tita Melba asked, and I nodded. "Do you have a picture? Let me see!"

I took out my phone and went to number eleven's IG profile. That's when I noticed he had posted something new—a photo of the view from his hotel room, apparently.

"What a handsome young man, Kai. Why didn't you bring him here? Introduce us!"

"Melba, it's like he's your own child," Mom teased.

I laughed, especially when Mom and Tita started bickering playfully. I ignored them and focused on eating while waiting for number eleven's reply—which finally came at 2 PM! MVP woke up late.

I don't know… tsk. After that hug he gave me, I kind of expected a *good morning* message from him.

Yes, okay! I'm being clingy! Acting like a boyfriend! But just a simple *good morning* since we were going to meet again on Monday. What could I do if number eleven woke up in the afternoon? He still greeted me with a *good afternoon*, but there's something different about a *good morning*, isn't there?

Ugh, I don't even know with you, Kaizen. You're acting like an idiot. Calm yourself down.

But when Monday finally came, I woke up so early. We agreed to meet at 7 AM, but my eyes were wide open at 4 AM. It's not obvious that I couldn't calm myself down, right? Tsk. This is different. So I did some deep breathing exercises to try not to seem too excited about seeing him again.

I took my time showering and getting dressed, but I almost strangled the taxi driver just to make him drive faster to Burnham Park, where I was supposed to meet number eleven.

Honestly, sometimes I'm scared of myself.

"Good morning, Kai," number eleven greeted me as I approached him.

I smiled. Shit. It's okay now that he didn't greet me with a *good morning* on Sunday. It feels much better in person anyway.

"Good morning," I replied.

I casually checked him out. Damn. This guy always looks so fresh. He's just wearing a simple white shirt, training shorts, and rubber shoes, but he still looks so handsome. And he looks even hotter in that black baseball cap.

Of course, I couldn't ignore his cologne either—up to now, I still don't know what brand it is or how much it costs.

I ended up looking at my own outfit. We're almost dressed the same, except I'm wearing a black shirt instead of white. But why does it feel like I look like a mess? I showered. I even put on sunscreen. It's so unfair.

Oh yeah, by the way, this is what we're wearing because we agreed to go jogging at Burnham Park. I immediately agreed because I haven't worked out in days.

Plus, I thought about it—it's my first time jogging with number eleven.

A jogging date, Kai?

Tsk. No, it's not!

"I brought these," number eleven said, showing me badminton rackets and a shuttlecock. "In case you get tired of running."

"Are those yours? Did you bring them from Manila?"

He nodded and smiled.

Wow. What a good morning indeed, Kai!

We started jogging. Actually, I think only he was jogging. As for me, I was practically running because of how fast number eleven was going! For every one step he took, I had to take two! I didn't expect this to be his version of a morning run. In the end, I was drenched in sweat, while MVP looked as fresh as the flowers in Burnham Park. It didn't even seem like he broke a sweat.

"Water?" he asked, handing me his tumbler when we sat down to rest for a bit.

I was a little taken aback. "Huh?"

He opened his tumbler and handed it to me again. "Water, Kai."

"Me?"

He laughed. "Is there another Kai here?"

"No, I mean… is it okay to drink from your tumbler? Aren't you grossed out by saliva?"

"Saliva-conscious?"

"Yeah. Some people don't like others drinking from their tumblers. I get it, though—it's for safety and hygiene reasons."

He slowly nodded. "I don't mind you drinking from my tumbler."

"Are you sure? Isn't that kind of like an indirect kiss—"

I froze.

We locked eyes.

Until I felt my whole face heat up. And it got worse when I noticed his ears were turning red too!

We both quickly looked away. Shit, Kai! What's wrong with your mouth?! You're going to get me in trouble! Why do your other body parts always act before your brain does?

So, to avoid making things more awkward, I took his tumbler and drank from it. I just didn't let my lips touch it—I kept my mouth open while drinking. Afterward, I invited him to play badminton instead.

And it was a bit frustrating because why is he so good at hitting the shuttlecock too?!

"I'm done," I panted. I didn't expect that even in badminton, number eleven would be this competitive. I even told him earlier that we'd play casually, but he played like some kind of android. And he was laughing at me too!

"Tired already?"

"Yeah. Your game is Olympic-level!"

Of course, he just laughed at me again.

Ugh. You're lucky you're cute, MVP. After chasing me around with the shuttlecock, I suggested we just walk around instead. We even saw some people doing Zumba, and as a joke, I asked him if he wanted to join them. He just shook his head, and I laughed. Imagine, number eleven grooving in Burnham Park with Baguio's aunties? I don't even want to think about it.

We ended up eating breakfast at a carinderia after getting tired of walking around. Then I went home for a bit, and he returned to his hotel before we met up again to tour the places we hadn't visited on Saturday.

Our outing turned out to be pretty productive, ending at a coffee shop where number eleven tried their matcha latte. It was already afternoon by then, and I even asked him if he wanted to go back to the Night Market, but he declined since we were leaving for Manila early the next day.

To be honest, I forgot that we'd be traveling back together.

"Hi," I greeted him the next day when he stopped his car in front of me.

It was Tuesday, and it was time for us to head back to Manila. I chose the spot in front of his hotel as our meeting place so he wouldn't have to drive all the way to Burnham. Plus, I was already embarrassed enough about hitching a ride with him.

"Good afternoon, Kai," he said with a smile.

Damn. He's really handsome. I don't know, but I think I like him best when he's wearing a baseball cap. He looks like Tadashi Hamada from *Big Hero 6* when he wears it.

"Number eleven," I called out to him once I got into the passenger seat and he started driving.

"Hmm?"

"What's your skincare routine?"

He glanced at me briefly and laughed. "What?"

"What do you put on your face? If you use anything, what brand is it so I can try it too?"

He laughed even harder. "I just wash my face in the morning, Kai."

"Wash your face with what?"

"Water?"

"Just water? That's the secret to your smooth skin?"

I noticed him biting his lower lip, trying to hold back a smile. His ears were turning red again too. Shit… I don't want to assume, but is he feeling kilig? Is that all it takes to make MVP feel shy—just telling him how smooth his skin is?

But I won't tease him about it. What if he stops feeling shy around me in the future if I do?

"What kind of water? Mineral water?"

But he just laughed at me again.

He had been driving for a few minutes when I realized we were on Session Road. I furrowed my brow when he stopped in front of a bakery famous for its cream puffs.

"Are you buying something here?" I asked.

"Yeah. I want to buy something for your mom and your tita before we go back to Manila."

My jaw dropped, and at the same time, my chest started pounding. Honestly, I didn't expect him to think of that. But wait, so are we going to my house now? Will he meet Mom and Tita?

I suddenly got nervous for some reason. Tsk. Why am I nervous? It's not like I'm introducing him to Mom as—

Oh, Kai. Calm down. Inhale. Don't forget to exhale.

But before my brain could wander off too far, number eleven got out of the car, and I quickly followed him. When we entered the bakery and he asked me what was good to buy, I immediately pointed out the cream puffs. He bought three boxes with assorted flavors—one for us and two for Mom.

When we got back to his car, I volunteered to hold the boxes.

"Baby, seatbelt."

I think my brain was still distracted because I couldn't stop thinking about how we were going to my house today, so I didn't quite catch what he said.

I turned to look at him. "H-Huh?"

That's when I caught him with his lips slightly parted and his face bright red. I frowned when I noticed his facial expression looked completely shocked. What's going on?

"Huh?"

"Uh, did you say something?"

He blinked a few times. I just stared at him until he suddenly shook his head and smiled. He even touched the back of his neck.

"Seatbelt, Kai."

"Oh," I said and clicked it on.

I heard number eleven laugh softly as he started driving again. I asked him what was up, but he just shook his head and gave me a smile.

"Hi, Ma," I greeted Mom as she opened the gate for us. I laughed when I saw her surprised that I was back so soon. I gave her a blessing.

"Oh, Kai, why are you back? Did you forget something?"

Her gaze shifted from me to the person behind me. I turned to look at number eleven, and I almost laughed because he looked like a statue standing there, perfectly still. You could tell he was nervous, holding those boxes of cream puffs he was going to give to Mom.

Just earlier, when we left the bakery, he seemed to be in such a good mood, right? I even caught him glancing at me several times and smiling. His ears were turning red, and he kept shaking his head.

What happened now, number eleven? Did our confidence just disappear?

But I didn't expect to see this nervous face of MVP today. Usually, when he's on the court, he's serious and confident. On normal days, he's chill and always smiling.

Is he nervous because he's meeting Mom?

And what if I introduce him as—

As what, Kai? If you're brave, go ahead. As what? Boyfriend?

Boyfriend, right? Go ahead and say it.

Tsk. My brain is being annoying again. And my heart isn't helping either—it's so bold, flirting right in front of my mom. These rebellious internal organs of mine have no sense of timing. So frustrating.

Number eleven slowly approached until he was standing beside me. Both of us looked up at Mom. Wow. If she wanted to, she could easily squash us both with her height compared to MVP's towering figure.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Reyes."

I don't know whether to laugh at number eleven for being overly formal and adding an accent to the word *po* or at Mom, who was surprised to be called "Mrs. Reyes" and immediately gave him a blessing in return.

Wow, MVP really knows how to score points! He knows how to say *po* and give blessings too!

"Good afternoon to you too, hijo."

Mom and I exchanged glances, and I could see the question in her eyes about why number eleven was with me. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention to her that I'd be riding back to Manila with MVP. But to be fair, I didn't expect that number eleven would want to personally say goodbye to Mom before we left Baguio.

I was about to speak, but number eleven beat me to it.

"I'm Roen Alejo, *po*. Kai's…" He paused for a moment, cleared his throat, and continued, "...friend."

I saw Mom nod and smile. I don't know why, but… it felt like a thorn had been pulled out of my chest when I saw that smile she gave number eleven.

I was about to speak again, but I froze when number eleven handed the boxes of cream puffs to Mom.

"This is for you, *po*," he said.

My jaw dropped. Wow. Number eleven spoke in Tagalog! There's just something amazing about hearing him speak in Tagalog. How do I explain it… it just sounds expensive? You know he doesn't use it often in daily life. It sounds conyo (posh), but it suits him.

So cute. Ugh, annoying.

"You went through the trouble, hijo. Thank you for this," Mom said.

"You're welcome, *po*."

"But I already know you. Kai has told us about you."

Number eleven glanced at me. I could see he was a little surprised, but I just smiled and looked away. Shit. Mom just threw me under the bus. What if he gets the wrong idea? What if he starts thinking I'm head over heels for him? Tsk.

"So you toured him around Baguio? Did you enjoy yourself? Didn't my son take you everywhere?"

"Ma…" I scolded her lightly, but she just smiled at me.

Look at her! Those smiles—I got them from her, you know. Tsk.

Number eleven laughed. "I enjoyed myself, *po*. Your son is an excellent tour guide."

An excellent tour guide, Kaizen! We exchanged glances again, and this time, number eleven used that forbidden smile. It felt like the three of us were just joking around. My chest started pounding again. Right in front of my mom, I'm being flirted with? So bold. Tsk.

"That's good to hear," Mom said, looking at me. "I thought you were heading back to Manila today, Kai? Or did your schedule change?"

I was about to speak again, but number eleven beat me to it once more.

"Mrs. Reyes—"

"Just call me Tita, hijo," Mom interrupted, laughing. "Mrs. Reyes is Kai's grandmother on his father's side."

I saw number eleven's ears turn red, and his lips parted slightly. That's when I confirmed that he gets shy when his ears turn red. And they often turn red when he's talking to me, right?

So, he gets shy around me?

This number eleven is something else! Why is he shy? And why does the thought of him being shy around me make me feel kilig?

I don't even know with you, Kaizen. Your brain really excels at these kinds of things.

I bit my tongue and simply glanced at number eleven again. He awkwardly smiled at Mom and nodded slowly. He even scratched the back of his neck. Damn, he looks so handsome when he's shy! Like those colorful chicks they used to sell at schools. He's the blue chick.

But are there chicks this big? This one's already a chicken, lol.

We locked eyes, and now his face was the one turning red. I bit my lip to hold back a laugh.

Okay. He’s not the blue chick anymore. Now he’s the red chick.

He cleared his throat. "Tita…"

"What is it, hijo?"

"I’m actually here, *po*, to inform you that I’ll be accompanying Kai back to Manila. I brought my car, *po*," he said, pointing to his car parked not far from our house. "And I promise to drive safely and make sure Kai reaches their dormitory safe and sound, *po*."

Shit.

I couldn’t help but stare at number eleven as he said that to my mom.

Of course, I could hear my heart pounding again, reminding me of yet another reason why I like number eleven.

Kai, take a deep breath.

This isn’t the time to get kilig.

Because while I felt like a thorn had been pulled out of my chest when Mom smiled at number eleven earlier, now it felt like that thorn was back because Mom didn’t react immediately. She wasn’t showing any signs of annoyance or anything, but she was just staring at number eleven!

So you can imagine the relief I felt when she suddenly smiled again and nodded.

I panicked!

"Just be careful on your trip, okay? Message me when you arrive and let me know you’ve reached safely."

"Rest assured, *po*, that you will be updated from time to time."

"Thank you," Mom said. "Oh, wait, have you eaten yet, hijo? I’ll cook something. Come inside. You and Kai should eat before you leave."

"Ma, no need. We might end up driving late," I said.

"I cook really fast—"

"Pogi!" Tita Melba suddenly popped up beside Mom. "You’re Kai’s friend, right? I’m his aunt. Tita Melba. What’s your name again, hijo?"

Number eleven smiled and gave Tita Melba a blessing, though she looked slightly offended. "Roen Alejo, *po*. Nice to meet you, *po*."

"No need for the *mano* with me!" Tita laughed but was immediately scolded by Mom. Still, she didn’t care. "You’re such a tall young man! How tall are you? How old are you? Do you have a girlfriend? My nephews and nieces, like Kai here, are single—"

"Melba, let’s go inside. You’re scaring the poor boy."

Thankfully, Mom was there to intervene. Is this aunt of mine really trying to set number eleven up with my cousins? Tsk. I got a little annoyed at that.

Tita Melba bombarded number eleven with a few more questions before we were finally able to say goodbye and leave. I was surprised when number eleven asked for Mom's number so he could send updates. I told him I could just message her myself, but he said I might forget. So I let it slide.

But that wasn't all—Mom didn't just give him her number. She also packed longganisa and a bunch of vegetables for him!

As if those things are hard to find in Manila.

I just shook my head at that.

"Sorry about Mom and Tita," I said once we got back into his car.

"It's okay. They're actually really nice."

"Thanks again for the cream puffs for Mom."

He smiled. "You're always welcome, ba—" He paused, cleared his throat, and corrected himself. "You're always welcome, Kai."

Then he turned to look at the road. But there he goes again—he started shaking his head, scratching the back of his neck, and smiling as if he just thought of something. Just like earlier before we went into the house.

I frowned but didn't ask. I figured he wouldn't tell me anyway.

Still, I was curious about what he was thinking.

But I was more excited because this was the first time I'd be with him on a long trip. Even longer than when we went to Tanay.

"Ready to go?" he asked after starting the car.

I nodded. "Yep. It's going to be a long ride."

"Yeah..." he replied, and I felt him looking at me, so I turned to face him too.

Our eyes locked.

It lasted a few seconds, so I started to wonder.

"Why?" I asked.

But instead of answering… shit! My eyes widened when he suddenly leaned toward me! I froze in my seat, especially when I felt his breath on my cheek! I think I even forgot to breathe because suddenly it felt like the car had gotten smaller.

Damn…

My heart felt like it was about to explode.

"Kai," he called my name in a deep voice. Shit, why does his voice sound like that? Why does it feel like he's holding his breath? What's going on?!

I couldn’t look at him or even turn my head. One wrong move and I might kiss number eleven! He’s so close to me right now!

"Seatbelt."

"H-Huh?"

I didn’t even realize what happened next. I heard a *click*, and then I saw that number eleven was already sitting properly in the driver’s seat again, smiling widely.

32

I should've enjoyed my trip back to Baguio more. I should've asked Mom to cook a lot of food. I should've relaxed even more. And I should've made the most of the time I spent with number eleven back then.

How did the days pass by so quickly after that? I could barely keep up with everything I've done and still need to do. It feels like I just re-enrolled, and now I'm already approaching the in-season tournament again? Wasn't it just the finals recently? Ugh, I don't know. I didn't even get to fully enjoy the holidays!

Was that it?

Did All Saints' Day, Christmas, and New Year's already pass by? And now it's back to schoolwork? Back to workouts and intense training again? And midterms, also known as hell week, are already around the corner?

And oh, my birthday is coming up too!

I'm getting older again this year.

And before I know it, I'll probably be enrolling for another semester because I'm already in my third year?

You're thinking way ahead, Kai. Why don't you focus on passing this semester first? Instead of reviewing, you're sleeping, right?

But yeah, after training, all I really want to do is rest. I don't have the energy to study lessons anymore because Coach has been working us so hard lately. We're all exhausted after every session. There's no energy left to joke around either. Our goal this year is to reach the podium.

Since we made it to the final four last year and won bronze during the off-season, why not aim higher this time? Especially since we have new rookie recruits who are strong players.

It's exciting, actually. I have a new libero teammate, LA. He's a talented kid—quick, agile, and picks up on everything Coach asks him to do. He adapts quickly to the team's system too. He gets nervous sometimes, but I tell him to just enjoy every game and not let the pressure get to him.

But maybe I should be the one telling myself that because I got nervous when I found out Easton would be our first opponent this season.

Tsk. What is this? Are we starting the season with a 0-1 record already?

Hey, Kai, stop being so negative! You can do this! The ball is still round!

Just keep training! Practice more so you can beat them!

"I quit!" Jerome shouted.

Vince and I were startled. We're all studying now because hell week starts tomorrow at Creston. Honestly, I don't even know if what I'm doing counts as studying anymore.

No matter how much I read, nothing seems to stick in my brain! So frustrating.

"You idiot, Captain! You scared me!" Vince threw a crumpled piece of paper at Jerome.

They started wrestling, making it even harder for me to focus on what I was reading. So I grabbed my reviewers and phone and headed to the dorm lobby to pretend I'm a diligent student there instead.

I kept telling myself: I'm studying so I can play this season. If I fail even one subject, I won't be allowed to play, no matter how good I am on the team. Creston is strict with student-athletes.

But even on the first page of what I was reading, I couldn't concentrate.

Shit. I can't afford to fail.

I need motivation!

I took out my phone and went on IG. Chocolate isn't cutting it anymore. My brain needs a different kind of motivation.

kaireyes: Hello. Are you still awake?

But it seems like my *motivation slash inspiration* isn't online.

Westmore's hell week is next week, right?

But Kai, that person also needs to review! He's a future engineer! His subjects are harder than mine. Don't forget, you guys saw each other last week. Tsk.

I put my phone back on the table and forced myself to read. But it seems like I really do have a goldfish brain. All I could think about was number eleven.

What's he doing right now? Probably asleep already? Well, it is night, after all.

But I miss him.

We haven't seen each other today because of my midterms. After his trip to Baguio, number eleven and I have been meeting up often—not every day, but every week. And every day, we talk on IG.

I couldn't help but remember how he greeted me on New Year's exactly at midnight. Kaizen was so kilig back then. Imagine—he was the first person to call me just to wish me a *Happy New Year* in that deep voice of his during the call.

I felt weak.

That's when I truly realized how much I've fallen for him.

And he was in Japan at the time! His family celebrated New Year's there. So it was just funny and sweet that he still called me to greet me. I thought he'd just send me a DM, but he went out of his way to call.

That's why, if it were up to me, I'd rather see him today. But he was the one who said I needed to focus on studying. He told me we'd meet up after our midterms. Of course, I agreed because he's right. Besides, we can still talk on IG or through calls.

I even joked that if we met earlier, we could've brought our reviewers and studied together. It would've been my first time seeing him review!

But who am I kidding? If I were with him, my attention would be on number eleven, and I wouldn't be able to study at all.

Like right now. I almost threw away my reviewers when my phone rang because he finally replied. You're hopeless, Kai!

roenalejo11: Sorry for the late reply, Kai. Just got out of the shower. What's up?

kaireyes: Are you going to sleep already?

roenalejo11: Later. Why? Is there a problem?

kaireyes: Nothing, hehe. Alright, goodnight.

roenalejo11: What are you doing? Still studying?

kaireyes: Yep. But my brain can't handle it anymore. Send me some good luck for tomorrow.

roenalejo11: Can I call?

He wants to call, Kai!

I immediately opened the front camera on my phone to check if I looked okay since I hadn't showered yet. I combed my hair with my fingers and made sure my face wasn't oily before replying to number eleven.

kaireyes: Okay.

But as soon as I sent that, I nearly fell off my seat when he requested a video call within a minute. Damn, Kai! Didn't he say he'd call? Why are you panicking?!

"Hey," he greeted as soon as I answered the call. He was already lying on his bed, and my heart started racing when I saw him… shit. Why isn't he wearing a shirt? Is this how he sleeps? Isn't he cold? I can see the air conditioner in the background!

Only his shoulders and half his chest were visible, but… tsk. Calm down, Kai!

Is this your first time seeing someone shirtless? Tsk!

"Hey," I replied.

Look at his face, Kaizen!

"Are you on a study break? Or am I disturbing you?"

"It's bold of you to assume I've been studying. I've just been taking breaks," I answered.

He laughed. If only I weren't so shy, I'd ask him to record his laugh and send it to me so I could use it as background music while studying.

"You've got this, Kai. You can do it."

He smiled.

I bit my tongue to stop myself from smiling back.

Damn, number eleven, you're really something else. You win. You're the best. It was just a smile, but it felt like I could review all the way up to finals. Overacting? Maybe. But that's just how it is.

I'm okay now. I can focus on reviewing again. It was just one video call.

We chatted for a little while longer until number eleven told me to get back to studying and to sleep early once I was done. He also reminded me not to stay up too late since we've been training already.

Of course, I followed his advice, even though I wanted to keep talking to him.

After our video call ended, I turned back to my reviewers. I was about to start reading again when I nearly jumped in shock because I didn't notice Jerome was already sitting on the couch in front of me! And he looked so smug too!

"Scared you, Kai?" he teased with a grin.

I wanted to throw a crumpled piece of paper at him, but I held back. Knowing him, he might suddenly wrestle me or something. So I just glared at him instead.

"I'm studying. Go back inside," I said. "You should study too. If you fail—"

"Were you on a video call with Alejo?"

I didn't respond. Whatever, Captain!

"Last few weeks, you two have been together, right? And every time I catch you chatting with him, you're always smiling—"

"What smiling—"

"I saw you, Kai. Don't deny it. You're busted," he cut me off.

"And now you're calling each other. C'mon, Kai, tell me—are you two official yet?"

I immediately looked away. Tsk. Jerome can really be such a nuisance sometimes. And he wonders why I don't tell him anything? I know he'll just tease me. This guy loves joking around.

"Are you official yet? It's just us here, c'mon! That's unfair. When I have someone special, I tell you about it, but you? You're keeping it all to yourself? Spill it, Kai."

"I never forced you to tell me your stories, you know."

"That's how it is!" He shook his head at me. "But seriously—are you two official yet?"

"No—"

"Not yet? At this point?"

"Keep it down, Captain! Your voice is too loud! People in Baguio might hear you!"

"But you're not official yet? Damn, Alejo's moving so slow!"

I couldn't hold back anymore and threw a pencil at him. He caught it but still stared at me in disbelief. Tsk! Great! The motivation I got from number eleven is gone now! All because of Jerome being such a pest.

"Or maybe you're the one moving too slow, Kai?"

"Huh?"

"Who's the one courting between the two of you?"

"I don’t know what you’re talking about, Captain! Just go back already!"

"Sorry, sorry! I’m not familiar with this kind of… setup? Is that the right word?"

"Captain, please, have mercy! I need to study. Go back to the room—"

"But you two have confessed to each other already, right?"

I froze.

We locked eyes, and when I didn’t answer right away, his eyes widened, and he pointed at me. Tsk!

"Not yet? That’s painfully slow, Kai!"

It seemed like Jerome wasn’t going to let me off the hook, so I gathered all my things. I’m going back to my bed! I’ll just wake up early tomorrow to study.

But Jerome still wasn’t done. He laughed and said words that I knew would mess with my mind in the coming days. Words I’ve been avoiding thinking about for the past few months, but deep down, I know they’re things number eleven and I need to address.

"Talk about it already, Kai. Confess to each other. Actions speaking louder than words doesn’t always work. It’s different when you actually hear that he likes you. You can do it."

33

Hell week ended with me feeling a bit distracted because of what Jerome said. That guy really has a way of stirring things up. Instead of focusing on my exams, my mind kept wandering to how I should bring up... wait, what should I even call the setup between me and number eleven?

Happy friends?

Ugh. What even is that, Kai? Does something like that exist? Tsk.

It feels like all my overthinking before number eleven went to Baguio has come back. Those times when I was simultaneously confused, assuming, questioning, delusional, imagining, and feeling kilig over the things he said and did.

Because if it were just up to me, confessing wouldn't be a problem. I almost did it, right? If we feel the same way, then great. If not, then I'll cry for a bit. Just a bit because I have other things to do, you know.

Ahem. Volleyball. Ahem. Studies. Ahem. Future.

It's just number eleven I'm thinking about.

Maybe he's not ready yet. Maybe he still has questions about himself. And I don't want to ask because things like gender shouldn't be questioned. It's up to the person to decide when they're ready to tell others, and especially themselves, who they are.

If he's not ready, who am I to force him to say it, right?

But at the same time, it's not like he's hiding that he likes me. I can be slow and clueless sometimes, but I'm not so clueless that I wouldn't notice the way number eleven acts and makes me feel.

Because if you think about it, Jerome is right. Actions speak louder than words, but it's still different when it's said out loud. It's still different when you hear it. It's still different when there's a label, through words, for whatever it is between the two of you.

Just imagining the words "I like you" coming out of number eleven's mouth makes my face redder than the strawberries in Baguio. And that's just my imagination, right? What more if it were real?

Tsk. You're so cheesy, Kai.

But you get my point, right?

You're the one who should confess first, Kaizen. Since when did you become so hesitant? Back then with Reena, you were quick to say you liked her and that you'd court her. What happened now?

This thing with number eleven is just different! Tsk.

How is it different? Because he's a guy too? Does that make a difference? There's no difference when it comes to love, Kai! No matter who it is, if you love them, you love them, you idiot!

Tsk. Just a little more, and I'll start thinking my brain has a mind of its own.

I shook my head, not because he didn't have a point, but to stop myself because I was so close to following my rebellious brain.

"Is there a problem, Kai?"

I turned to look at number eleven, who was already staring at me. We're here now at a café slash study hub near Creston. We were supposed to go to Tanay again, but I chose this place because it's closer and so number eleven could study since he has exams next week.

"Are you okay?" he asked again when I didn't answer right away. We were sitting side by side, and he closed the book he was reading before turning his body toward me.

We looked at each other.

I steeled myself and held his gaze. I took a deep breath and forced myself not to look away from his eyes.

Is it still delusional to think he likes me?

Am I still assuming if I think he sees me as more than a friend?

Because look at him. That's where I fell, right? In the way he looks at me with meaning. In his eyes that hold something when they meet mine.

"Number eleven..."

"Hmm?"

"What if..."

I like you?

He didn't say anything, but he kept staring at me, waiting for what I'd say next. But then I glanced at the books and reviewers on our table.

Maybe I'll confess after his hell week is over.

Or maybe before the in-season tournament starts.

"What is it, Kai?"

I just smiled and looked away. I turned my attention back to my phone and the iced coffee I ordered earlier.

No. Let's just do it this way. I'll confess if we win our first game. It's against Easton University, and I know they're a tough opponent, but I'll use my confession as extra motivation to beat them. Yes, that's it. That's how it should be, Kai.

Because I really want to tell number eleven that I like him. I won't ask him if he likes me back. I just want to say how I feel about him.

Suddenly, I felt nervous.

But the excitement was stronger.

"Nothing," I replied. "I think I'm still hungover from hell week," I said, pretending to laugh.

From my peripheral vision, I could see number eleven still looking at me, but I pretended not to notice. I took a sip of my iced coffee and played the highlights of Easton's games on my phone again.

"Hey, go study," I said when he still didn’t stop staring at me. If I were him, I’d be reviewing nonstop because when I looked at what they were studying, I got dizzy. That’s when I confirmed that I was never cut out for engineering.

"What are you watching?" He peeked at my phone.

Shit. He’s so close. Number eleven smells so good.

"Easton’s past games. I’m studying their moves since they’re our first game."

He nodded. "I see."

"Do you have any tips on how to beat them?"

"Heavy serves, ba—" He paused and cleared his throat. "Heavy serves, Kai. So their setter wouldn’t be able to create plays."

"That doesn’t seem effective. Their spikers are really good at out-of-system plays."

Our day ended with number eleven not reviewing and us just analyzing Easton’s players’ moves. But I told him to study, right? I don’t want to be the reason he fails. But he just said he could handle it. Tsk.

I forgot that aside from being a rich kid, number eleven is also a bright kid. So I wasn’t surprised when I found out he’s a dean’s lister.

"So, what’s up, Kai?" Jerome said as our team was warming up. Time really flies. It feels like I just blinked, and now it’s game day?!

But aside from the actual game against Easton, I’m more nervous about what happens if we win. If, emphasis on the word *if*, we win, I’ll confess to number eleven!

That’s what I’m really thinking about.

Sometimes, the hierarchy of my priorities in life is just different.

But of course, we need to win first. It’s an uphill battle, but as they say, the ball is still round.

"What’s up with what?" I asked Jerome.

The arena was filling up with people. Westmore and Easton are playing today, after all. And speaking of Westmore, they won their earlier game against Southern University.

Number eleven was even named Player of the Game.

It’s not surprising, but it’s still amazing to see him on the court. You’d think he hadn’t taken a break for months. I watched a bit of their game earlier, and the gentle giant Roen Alejo I was with in Baguio last year was nowhere to be seen.

And I’ll admit it... he’s hot when he’s playing.

"Has Alejo confessed to you—"

"Cap! You’re so loud!" I cut him off and covered his mouth. I heard him laugh and raise both hands in the air as if surrendering. The others were already looking at us. Tsk!

"Sorry," he said when I finally removed my hand from his mouth. "But still nothing? No confessions happening yet?" he whispered.

I frowned. "Nothing."

"How long? Kai, if someone else snatches him away..."

I automatically glared at him. But of course, our team captain just laughed. This guy is such a troublemaker. I'll have Vince scare him in the dugout later while he's showering.

"You're scary when you're jealous, Kai," he said with a giggle and pinched my cheek. I really want to smack him. He's lucky he's my captain, or else he would've gotten it from me earlier.

I'm already nervous.

I'm only brave now because number eleven isn't in front of me. But I have a feeling I'll panic later when I finally say it.

"Do you want me to speed up his confession to you?"

My forehead furrowed even more. "Huh?" Jerome just grinned and put his arm around me. A moment later, he leaned in close, and I was shocked when he suddenly kissed my cheek!

"You idiot—"

I didn't get to push Jerome away because the buzzer sounded. That was the sign that the team's official warmup was over and the game was about to start. Tsk! That guy's really crazy! No more captain, captain! I'm really going to smack him!

I gave him a dirty look, but he just flashed me a big grin as he ran away. I was about to go after him when he suddenly pointed, so I turned to look.

And I froze in place when I saw number eleven in the audience, his forehead furrowed as he stared at me seriously. My lips parted. Shit. Did he see that? Is he mad?

I didn't know he was going to watch!

"And wearing jersey number eleven, Creston University's starting libero, Kaizen Reyes!"

Creston's supporters cheered, but I was out of it as I stepped onto the court with the rest of our starting players. I couldn't get the look number eleven gave me earlier out of my head! Especially the way his forehead was furrowed! I feel like I'm in trouble even though I didn't do anything wrong!

"Kai, are you okay?" Jerome asked with a smile. I frowned at him, but he just laughed again. This is all his fault! He's really going to get it from me later in the dugout!

"You're bullying Kai again, cap," Vince said.
"He's just slow," Jerome said, pinching my cheek again.

Tsk. Instead of just confessing to number eleven, it looks like I'll have to explain myself at the police station.

34

Trigger warning: This chapter contains scenes that may be distressing or traumatizing for individuals who are experiencing or have experienced injuries. Reader discretion is advised. Thank you.

Our game against Easton University started with me not fully focused. How can I not get distracted when every time our eyes meet, all I see is number eleven frowning and looking upset? Tsk. It's like I just said I don't like it when he's in a bad mood, but look at MVP now—his expression is terrifying.

Even scarier than the strong attacks Easton's players are unleashing!

But of course, I'm trying my best not to think about number eleven right now. We have a game to win. That's where my focus should be.

Besides, my confession to MVP also depends on this, right? So I need to give it my all!

"Checkball!" I shouted when I saw the blockers' fingers of Easton move after Drew's spike.

We were about to celebrate, but it didn't happen because the referee blew the whistle and didn't award us the point. My jaw dropped, and I couldn't believe it. Even though it happened right in front of him, he still didn't see it as a checkball? What kind of call is that? Ridiculous.

I don't want to think about it, but it feels like we're being cheated. This is already the third time it's happened. Yes, our hit was out, but it was clear that the blockers' fingers moved! Yet the points still go to them? So frustrating.

I turned toward the bench when I heard Coach yelling and protesting. Jerome approached him, and a little while later, our team captain went to the first referee to clarify the call.

"Damn. That referee has been biased since the start," Paul muttered.

"Idiot, they shouldn't make it so obvious that they're favoring Easton. It's only the beginning of the season," Vince added.

I looked up at the scoreboard. It's Set 4 now. And can you believe it? We're leading by one set against Easton! Against last season's first runners-up! Against the off-season champions!

I'm not sure if they're just having an off-game or if we're really playing exceptionally well. The first thing I noticed was their poor performance during the consecutive misreceives in Set 1. It seems number eleven was right—Easton's weakness is heavy serves, so that's what we capitalized on.

Creston took Sets 1 and 2.

Easton bounced back in Set 3.

And now in Set 4, they're stealing points from us. The current score is 18-17, but if the first referee insists on his wrong call, Easton will gain a two-point lead over us.

Jerome is still arguing with the first referee, so I took this opportunity to huddle the team.

"Guys, don't let them see our morale drop if the point goes to them, okay? You know how their players are. They'll get cocky if they see we're affected," I told them.

They all nodded, though I'm not sure if they could still hear me over the loud cheering of the crowd in the arena.

"Just pass the ball to me. All spikers, approach, okay? Attack continuously. Even if you get blocked, I'll cover you, okay?"

"Copy, Kai!"

"This fourth set is ours! This game is ours!"

"This is it, guys! Our first win of the season!"

I could feel the adrenaline pumping through the team, but it seemed like this set wasn't meant for us. Jerome couldn't resolve things peacefully with the first referee. The point still went to Easton, and worse, Coach got a yellow card for yelling and protesting.

And just as I feared, it happened—the momentum of our team drastically changed after that. We started to get frustrated, and our errors piled up one after another. Even I, who was trying to stay calm, got annoyed, especially when Easton served an ace on me to take Set 4.

Damn.

This can't happen.

There's still Set 5, but we know Easton is more experienced when it comes to handling pressure and crucial stages of the game.

But as they say, the ball is still round.

"Guys, let it go. Forget about the last set. Focus again on this fifth set. Stick to the game plan!" Coach said before the deciding set began. We could barely hear him over the noise in the arena.

"Reception and defense are what we need right now, okay? Outsmart them with your attacks. Make your serves heavier, boys. That's what we lost in the last two sets. And most importantly, take the lead early. Pull away quickly. It's a race to 15. Clear?"

"Yes, coach!"

"Guys, no backing down, okay? This is ours!" Jerome said, and we stacked our hands together in the middle.

"Yes, captain!"

"Creston!"

"U!"

We returned to the court as the buzzer sounded. The tension I felt had doubled. If we beat Easton, it would be a huge upset. It would also be a massive confidence boost for us as a team. This game will dictate how our campaign goes this season.

And as I told myself earlier, my confession to number eleven depends on this.

Speaking of number eleven, I looked for him again in the crowd. I found him easily. I don't know why, but my eyes seem trained to find him even in a sea of people.

Our eyes met immediately.

I thought I'd see him frowning again, but it seems number eleven's mood has changed.

Now, he’s just seriously looking at me. He’s holding a long white balloon that I don’t know where he got because it wasn’t there earlier.

Our gaze lingered on each other for a while.

Would it be too much to wish that the referee wouldn’t blow the whistle yet? That this moment between us wouldn’t end? Because honestly, I’m okay just staring at number eleven’s face.

I couldn’t help but smile at him.

Just one smile, MVP. That’s all I need to keep going.

And my lips parted in surprise because he didn’t disappoint me. It felt like number eleven heard me because he raised the balloon he was holding and smiled back at me.

I felt my chest pounding harder—not because of exhaustion, not because of adrenaline, and not because of the fear that we might lose today.

It’s because I like him.

I really, really like him.

And in those moments, I made up my mind—I’ll confess to him no matter what the result of this game is. Whether we win or lose, I’ll confess.

But damn… just one smile from number eleven, and I’m okay again.

I’m ready to fight. It’s like magic—my fatigue disappeared. Tsk. So cheesy, but whatever. I’ve fallen for him already.

"Nice pass, Kai!"

I grinned when I saw how good my receive was, and Jerome barely had to move from his position. So what was the result? An easy quick point and a great start for Creston U!

"Nice one!"

I felt Jerome ruffle my hair as we celebrated.

Set 5 continued with both teams exchanging points. If you ask me, I’m okay with how things are going, especially since these aren’t just any opponents. The important thing is that we’re not letting their score pull too far ahead—we’re keeping our chances alive.

But damn, we’re starting to get tired too.

This game is insane. So intense. It feels like a championship game already. Neither of us is letting the ball drop easily. It’s all long rallies accompanied by the loud cheers of the crowd.

But it’s not just us who are getting exhausted. The entire arena erupted again when Jerome served an ace against Easton’s ace spiker!

The score is 14-12 in favor of Creston! It’s match point for us!

"Damn, Captain! That was amazing!" Vince shouted as he lifted Jerome.

"It’s not over yet! One more!" Drew added.

Thankfully, Easton has no timeouts left. And it seems their receivers are still out of focus because Jerome almost served another ace! We nearly celebrated because of that!

I quickly returned to my position to defend, but I didn’t anticipate Easton’s next attack. We thought they’d hit the ball hard, but when their player jumped, they suddenly decided to do a drop shot instead.

Everything happened so fast after that.

I dove to attempt a pancake save.

But I didn’t expect my knee to hit the floor first. All I heard was a crack, and the next thing I knew, I was screaming in pain while clutching my right leg.

Shit.

"Kaizen!"

I squeezed my eyes shut from the pain. I couldn’t tell what was happening around me anymore. All I knew was that my right knee hurt so much! I heard someone whistle, followed by loud shouting from somewhere.

Soon, I could hear the voices of my teammates one by one, asking me questions I couldn’t understand anymore.

"Everyone, step back! Let us handle this!" someone shouted. "Get a stretcher! Hurry!"

Am I going to be injured?

My knee hurts so much… shit.

Please, no. Please don’t let it be an ACL tear, Lord.

I still want to play. The season has just started. The game isn’t over yet. Maybe it’s just a bruise that can heal with rest. My team still needs me…

"Kai, can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes when I heard that very familiar voice. For a moment, I forgot about the pain in my knee when I saw the worried look on number eleven’s face.

Wait… wasn’t he just in the audience earlier? How did he end up here?

But… why does it feel like this? There are other people around us, but he’s the only one I can clearly see…

I don’t know why, but I managed to smile despite feeling the excruciating pain in my knee.

"Kai—"

"Roen."

He froze.

"I like you."

Naks. You finally said it, Kai. Even though your knee hurts this much, huh? Your priorities in life are really something else.

But at least, I've said it.

I saw number eleven's eyes widen. He said something, but I didn't hear it anymore as everything around me turned black.

35

I woke up in the hospital. Honestly, it was only when I realized where I was that it truly sank in that what happened wasn't a dream.

And I confirmed it even more when I saw my leg and knee propped up on high pillows, wrapped in a compression bandage. I tried to feel it, and it still hurt, so even though I wanted to sit up, I didn't force it, afraid it might get worse.

I took a deep breath.

I really wanted to cry.

I was aware that this could happen in the world of sports, but I never expected to be one of those who'd experience it.

And it's not about being negative, but based on the pain I felt earlier on the court, I knew there was a big chance I had an ACL tear injury. That's the most dreaded thing for an athlete. It would've been better if it were just an ankle sprain. When it's the knee, most likely, you won't be able to return to playing right away.

I shook my head and stared at the ceiling of the room.

It's frustrating.

It's only my first game this season. The start of our campaign. My playing year is wasted. If this is really an ACL tear, I might not be back until next year. You're so unlucky, Kai.

I'd rather get hit in the face multiple times than this.

It's really annoying and heartbreaking. Tsk. Because it's such a waste. I wanted to make up for our team this season. I wanted us to get back on the podium. And if we're lucky, make it to the finals. And if luck is really on our side, win the gold medal.

But... what if I can't play the same way after this?

What if... it takes me a long time to recover?

Tsk. Calm down, Kaizen. There you go again, overthinking.

But I can't help it. And I still don't know if we won against Easton earlier.

Did we win?

I know we only needed one more point earlier... or was it yesterday? How many hours was I unconscious? And why did I faint? That's so embarrassing. I was seen live on national TV passing out!

"Kai, you're awake."

I almost jumped in surprise when the door suddenly opened, and there stood our coach along with our strength and conditioning coach. Before I could even gather myself, they called the doctor.

A lot of things were explained to me, and before I knew it, the tests (X-ray and MRI) had already started to confirm if it was indeed an ACL tear. It all happened so fast that I didn't even get a chance to ask our coaches anything. I was also nervous about the results, even though I had a feeling it was serious.

And when the doctor confirmed that it was indeed an ACL tear, I finally broke down in tears.

It was embarrassing in front of our coaches. I couldn't hold it back. But there was nothing I could do. My eyes just welled up. Bad luck. That's all I could think of right now. I'm so unlucky. Tsk.

I knew there was a big chance it was that serious, but it still hurts when it's confirmed to you. Officially, you can't play for a while.

Wow... one year without volleyball. Can I handle that? If my body doesn't cooperate, the recovery time could even be more than a year.

It's true that the mental impact of an injury is worse than the physical.

"I'm sorry, Kai," our coach said before hugging me. "But the whole team is here for you, okay? You can do this, kid. We won't leave you until you recover. You know that. One year of rehab will pass quickly."

I just nodded and tried not to cry anymore.

He's right. A year goes by fast. I've also watched and talked to many who've had ACL tear injuries. They toughened up, followed what they were told to do, and recovered quickly.

I can do this.

Time flies anyway. Before I know it, I'll be training again. Then joining scrimmages. Then chasing balls on the taraflex again.

You can do this, Kai.

"Did we win, coach?" I asked, remembering the game before the accident happened.

He smiled and ruffled my hair. "We won, Kai. Rest for now. I'll talk to the doctor again to find out when your operation will be. I'll also call your parents in case they don't know yet."

I breathed a sigh of relief. We won. At least what happened to me was still worth it.

I nodded at our coach and thanked him.

"Kaaaaaiiii!"

Not even an hour into my rest, the door opened again, and my teammates barged in, led by Jerome. They immediately surrounded me, and I swear I wasn't going to die from the injury but from suffocation. Imagine being surrounded by tall volleyball players? I don't know what to do.

"You idiots, take it easy! Don't bump his knee! Everyone can talk to Kai! Stop pushing each other!" Jerome said.

"How are you, Kai? Does it hurt?" Kiko asked.

Paul immediately smacked him on the head. "You idiot! Can't you see his knee is all wrapped up, and you're asking if it hurts?"

"You're the idiot! I was just asking!" Kiko said, putting Paul in a headlock.

"Is it an ACL tear, Kai?" Drew asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"When’s your operation?"

"I don’t know yet."

"Get well soon," Drew smiled. "We’ll wait for you."

I smiled back. "Thanks."

"By the way, we brought fruits, Kai! We also brought you clothes so you can change your underwear," Vince said, followed by loud laughter.

"Who’s going to change Kai’s underwear?"

I frowned. "You’re all crazy! I can handle myself."

"I love Kai, but I’m not ready for mature roles yet," Vince said, and they all laughed.

"Are you sure you can do it, Kai? I’m willing to help you change your briefs—" Kiko said, laughing as I threw a pillow at him.

I just shook my head as they all started talking at once. These guys are really something. It’s like they came here just to tease me. Who even let them in?

"Oh, by the way, did you know? We won against Easton!" Jerome said, and they all cheered again. These guys are so noisy. It’s embarrassing for the room next to us.

"First win of the season, baby!"

"Hey, calm down! I’ll smack you if you hit Kai’s knee!"

"You’re such a killjoy, cap!"

The whole team was so loud. They were so happy about our win against Easton. I wanted to tell them to calm down, but I let it go. Even I would’ve celebrated because it’s been a while since we beat them in-season.

"By the way, Kai," Jerome said as he sat on the edge of my bed while the others were busy watching TV and eating the fruits they brought for me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Don’t open your social media accounts just yet," Jerome said as he handed me my phone.

I furrowed my brow. "Why? Are there a lot of videos being shared about how I got injured?"

"Besides that," he replied.

"Why? What else is there?"

"About you and Alejo," he whispered.

My eyebrows furrowed even more. "Me and number eleven? Why—" I stopped mid-sentence as I suddenly remembered what happened before I passed out. My lips parted in surprise.

Jerome and I locked eyes. He nodded, probably realizing I had already understood what he meant.

I could feel my heart pounding.

Shit. I completely forgot about that. So, it wasn't a dream after all? It really happened—number eleven was there before I passed out?

So, it's also true that—

"There aren't any negative comments," Jerome said, pulling my attention back to him. "But you know, a lot of people are asking questions. Rumors have been spreading because the picture of you two from earlier went viral. You know how things are here. Even the smallest interaction between players gets turned into a story."

I took a deep breath. I wanted to say so many things, but for some reason, I couldn't react.

"And then there's Alejo. He moved like The Flash just to get to you when you were on the floor. He practically pushed everyone out of the way just to reach you. It was so obvious how worried he was about you, Kai. If his teammates hadn't talked to him, he probably would've come with us to take you to the hospital."

As Jerome spoke, my heart started beating faster and faster. I immediately thought of the worried look on number eleven's face before I passed out.

I said I didn't like it when he was upset.

But I realized I hated it even more when he was worried.

I glanced at my phone. Did he message me? Would he visit me here?

I wanted to see him.

"Cap," I called out to Jerome.

"What?"

"I confessed."

We locked eyes again. His eyes widened slightly, and his mouth opened in surprise.

"You confessed to Alejo?"

I nodded.

"When?"

I was about to answer when the door suddenly opened, and number eleven appeared.

It felt like my heart stopped for a few seconds. Shit… what kind of manifestation power is this, Kai?! Just a moment ago, you were wondering if number eleven would visit, and not even five minutes later, the universe granted your wish? You're really something! Our eyes met instantly.

Until his gaze shifted to Jerome, who was sitting next to me. He frowned for a moment but quickly looked back at me.

"Boys, let’s go. Let’s head out," Jerome suddenly said, standing up. "We still have training later."

I thought my other teammates would protest, but I blinked in surprise when they all stood up one by one and started saying their goodbyes.

"See you at the dorm, Kai," Jerome added, ruffling my hair slightly.

I didn’t say anything and just watched as he walked toward the door. He paused for a moment next to number eleven, patted his shoulder, and then left.

After that, number eleven slowly entered and closed the door behind him. We locked eyes again. His expression was serious, so I smiled.

"Hey," I greeted him, though my heart was already racing.

"Sit down," I said, pointing to the chair next to my bed.

"Hey," he said as he sat down.

"Hello," I replied, smiling at him again.

That’s it. I was just happy that he was here.

"How are you, Kai?" he asked, glancing at my knee. I could hear the sigh he let out as he looked at it.

"This one’s injured," I said, and he immediately looked back at me. "ACL. I need surgery, but I don’t know the schedule yet."

He nodded and just kept looking at me. Tsk. There he goes again with that worried face. Maybe it’s better when he’s upset instead.

"Hey, I’m fine. It’s not life-threatening. Just rehab, and I’ll be back on the court soon."

He didn’t say anything. He just kept staring at me, making my heart race even more. Usually, in situations like this, I’d look away. But now that I’ve confessed to him, why should I feel shy anymore, right?

"It hurts a bit, but I can handle it. I’m not the first person to have an ACL injury. I’ll recover. Plus, Coach and my teammates are here. They won’t leave me alone."

I laughed, hoping to lighten the mood and make number eleven stop looking so serious, but it didn’t seem to work. He just kept staring at me!

Am I going to start feeling kilig now? Tsk.

"And besides, you’re here too," I added.

I couldn’t help but grin when I saw his ears turn red. It seemed like he wanted to say something but stopped himself and looked away instead.

Tsk. So this is all it takes to make number eleven change his facial expression, huh?

One point for Kaizen!

But it only lasted for a moment. His worried expression returned as his gaze shifted back to my knee. What is this? Did his kilig expire already?

"Number eleven," I called out.
But he didn't even look at me! "Hey."

Still nothing! Is Kaizen ignoring me now?

"Roen."

Boom! Finally, MVP looked at me. So I just needed to call him by his first name.

I smiled. "Roen," I repeated.

His ears turned red again, so I burst out laughing. This is how he always is when he's shy or feeling kilig, right? Sometimes he's so easy to read. Should I teach him some techniques on how to hide it in front of his crush?

"Alright, serious now," I cleared my throat and stopped smiling. "I have a question," I said.

He furrowed his brow. "What is it?"

"What did I say to you before I passed out on the court earlier?"

If earlier only his ears turned red, now his whole face flushed. He avoided my gaze and scratched his cheek like a shy kid.

I ended up staring at his long fingers—one of the things I've always envied about him. His hands are so beautiful, especially those candle-like fingers.

What would it feel like to hold hands with number eleven?

"Hey, what's the answer?" I pressed since he hadn't responded.

"Is that a serious question?"

"Yes. Do I look like I'm joking?" We locked eyes again.

Number eleven didn't answer. He just kept looking into my eyes. I stared back at him. The room was silent, so I could hear my heart pounding loudly.

And just when it felt like my heart was about to leap out of my chest, number eleven held my hand and slowly leaned his face closer to mine. Closer… closer… until our foreheads touched.

"I like you too, Kai."

36

"I like you too, Kai."

My lips parted in surprise. I slightly pulled my face away from him, only to find that he was still staring straight into my eyes.

But I heard him right, didn't I? He really said it, didn't he?

Because my heart… it felt like it was about to explode from how fast it was beating. That's all I could hear since earlier.

But no… this isn't a dream, right? I'm not daydreaming, am I? This isn't part of my delusions, illusions, or daily imagination, is it?

He said he likes me too. That's what he said!

Number eleven likes me too!

I mean, I kind of already felt that he liked me too, but hearing it directly from him is completely different!

"H-huh?"

Shit, Kai! Are you really going to play deaf now?! What kind of response is that?! Weren't you so confident earlier? Tsk!

But I just really wanted to be sure. I wanted to hear it again—that he likes me too. That our feelings are mutual. That I'm not the only one going crazy whenever I talk to him or spend time with him. That I'm not the only one who gets kilig over the simplest things about him.

"Can you repeat what you just said?" It's not like there's any harm in him saying it again, right? I've waited so long for this.

Number eleven smiled, and automatically, I saw fireworks again. Tsk. Just one smile from him, and everything around me turned pink, and rainbows appeared out of nowhere.

Damn, Kai.

You've only just confessed your feelings, and already your mind is running wild like this?

"What I said," he began, and I felt his grip on my hand tighten. "Is that I like you, Kaizen Reyes."

Damn.

He actually repeated it.

Why did he repeat it? Doesn't he know my heart is already in my throat, and I'm about to burst?

You asked him to repeat it, Kai! You're such an idiot!

Be quiet for a moment, brain, please. Let my heart take over—it's already struggling to keep up with all the pounding.

"F-For real?" I tried to furrow my brow. "Or were you just pressured because I told you I like you?"

But number eleven just laughed. "Of course not."

Tsk. Why does he have to look so damn handsome right now? Is it because I'm even more biased toward him now that we both like each other?

Shit… my brain still can't fully accept that he really likes me. If my knee wasn't injured right now, I probably would've been wiggling in kilig already. Actually, I even forgot for a moment that I'm injured. Tsk. You're hopeless, Kai.

"I've liked you for a long time now," he added.

I did everything I could to hide the kilig on my face. But honestly, I was already feeling weak. How could I not, when he said it so casually? And in Tagalog too!

I felt like Jose Rizal would rise from his grave and applaud number eleven. That's how you do it, MVP! Love our language!

Make me swoon using Filipino!

But wait! I just realized what he said!

"F-For a long time? Really?"

"Yeah. Way back during Palarong Pambansa 4 years ago."

"Palaro—"

I froze and looked at him. But he wasn't looking at me anymore—his focus was on my fingers, which he was still playing with. Number eleven's ears were turning red again!

But shit… 4 years ago?

I immediately searched my memory. What was I doing 4 years ago? What grade was I in? Grade 11? Suddenly, I felt embarrassed. Back then, I was such a mess!

How could he have liked me back then?

Did we compete against each other? Honestly, I don't even remember seeing him or if our eyes ever met.

It's just hard to process. I don't know why, but I couldn't say anything, even though I had so many questions for him. My mind was traveling through what he said, especially after our mutual confession. Part of me knows it's true, but another part still can't quite believe it.

Number eleven didn't speak either. He just sat there with a small smile on his lips, staring intently at my hand.

But you know what? The silence between us wasn't awkward. It was… comfortable. Peaceful.

"You're actually the reason why I'm wearing jersey number eleven now."

I turned to number eleven again when he suddenly spoke. But his eyes were still focused on my hand, which he was still playing with.

"Me?" I asked.

He nodded and smiled as if recalling a happy memory. His ears started turning red again, and I think he noticed it too because he cleared his throat.

"Yes. You."

"Why me?"

"I was originally number six. But I decided to change my jersey number the first time I saw you at Palaro so we could match."

So that's the story behind his jersey number. I couldn't react, so I just nodded. But inside, I was doing cartwheels of joy. Damn, I'm the reason behind his jersey number? All this time, he's been number eleven because of me? So we'd match?

That's it—I'm kilig again. Stop smiling so much, Kai! It's embarrassing in front of number eleven! Thankfully, he's busy playing with my fingers, so he doesn't notice that my lips are about to split from smiling so much.

And speaking of what he's doing with my fingers—I don't know what's so fascinating about them, but he seems to be having fun. I'll let him be, though. I feel like from now on, he'll always do this. I should get used to it.

Hey, Kai!

Stop being so cheesy!

Are you two dating already or something?

You've only just confessed to each other, and you're already acting like a love-struck fool.

I ended up frowning. Tsk. That's all it took to wipe the smile off my face.

My brain is such a pest.

"Number eleven," I called out.

He looked at me. "Hmm?"

Damn. Was his voice always this soft, or am I just noticing everything now? Or maybe I was just born this extra?

"I like you," I said.

I saw him get surprised, and how many times have his ears turned red today? But I'm not complaining—this might be one of my favorite views.

"I like you," I repeated. "And you said you like me too—"

"Yes, I really do," he cut me off, and I turned red again. Tsk.

"Wait, let me finish first," I said.

He smirked. "Why? Are you feeling kilig?"

I gaped at his audacity. I didn't expect him to use the word *kilig* in a sentence!

"Wow. The guy who’s subscribed to unlimited ear reddening actually spoke."

I laughed when he suddenly touched his own ear. "My ears aren’t red."

"Wanna bet? 1K. What do you say?"

"Gambling is bad, Kai."

"I like you," I said and burst into loud laughter because not only did his ears turn red, but his whole face flushed too. "See? Your face is so warm, right? It’s turning red! If we had bet, I’d have 1K right now."

"Fine," he surrendered, pouted, and went back to playing with my hand.

Tsk. I didn’t know whether to laugh or find him cute. Imagine, such a grown man pouting? He looked like a duck. A handsome duck.

"But let’s go back to what I was saying earlier," I said, and he looked at me again.

"That’s right. You said you like me, and I like you too. Wait, are you sure about that?"

But he seemed a bit offended. "Of course, Kai."

"I’m just asking," I laughed. "But yeah… since we both, you know, feel the same way," I cleared my throat because I suddenly felt shy. Why am I feeling embarrassed now of all times? "Another question, uhm… what does this make us?"

"We’re together."

My eyes widened. Shit. I wasn’t prepared for that! I thought he’d take some time to think about his answer! Damn it!

And the way he said it—so casual and chill! He might as well have shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal!

Then he just went back to squeezing my fingers like nothing happened!

Just like that!

When I didn’t say anything, he turned to look at me again. This time, he laughed and tapped the tip of my nose when he saw me staring blankly at him.

"Look whose face is red now," he teased.

"B-Because I’m serious," I stammered.

"I’m serious too."

We locked eyes. I blinked, while he kept staring straight at me. Was he really being serious? I don’t know… you know how it is. Doesn’t it feel… fast? But where else is this going anyway? Isn’t this where it’s supposed to lead?

But isn’t there supposed to be a courting stage or something?

But who would do the courting between the two of us? Who’s courting who? And do we even need to court if we already like each other? Isn’t it automatic?

Are we really… official?

Shit, this is sticky!

I don’t know anymore!

"Kai."

"H-Huh?" I was still stuck on everything running through my mind when I felt number eleven’s fingers under my chin, gently pulling my gaze toward him.

"If you want to take this slow, it’s fine with me. Besides, I’m not going anywhere, so take your time to think, okay?"

My lips parted. "O-Okay…" I nodded, even though deep down I knew I didn’t need to think about it anymore.

He’s my boyfriend now.

We’re official.

"But just so you know, Kai, for me, I’m your number eleven, and you’re my baby."

37

Baby.

He called me *baby*.

Tsk. So annoying.

My cheeks already hurt from trying to hold back my smile because of that word. He called me his *baby*. Damn it. What a big baby I am. This number eleven is such a pest. How does he know so much? You wouldn't expect him to call someone… *baby*.

Damn, this is really sticky, isn't it? Of course, Kaizen is absolutely kilig. My toes have been curled since earlier! It's like I've never heard anyone being called that way before.

But it's different when you're the one being called baby! It feels cringy when you hear it for someone else, but when it happens to you, it feels so sweet to the ears. Now I get why people love it.

So… should I call him baby too?

He's such a big baby too, even bigger than me.

Honestly, I'm fine with it. But number eleven has always been in my mind. It's hard to call him anything else. Besides, he said he's *my* number eleven…

My number eleven.

Damn. Have mercy on your cheeks, Kaizen! They've been holding back a smile since earlier! You're hopeless! Tsk. But then again, I realized I can't call him baby just yet. He still doesn't know we're official. He said he's willing to wait, but should I really make him wait? I'm sure about my feelings. Plus, what if he gets bored and slips away?

"Number eleven," I called out.

"Yes, babe? Do you need something? Anything?"

My lips parted, and I did my best not to show how kilig I was from what he called me. Tsk. That's when I realized I'm still no expert at staying chill in front of my crush. My cheeks are probably going to end up bruised by the end of the day.

This won't do. He's the one who's supposed to be flustered right now.

"Okay," I said.

He furrowed his brow. "Okay? What's okay?"

"We're together," I smiled.

I saw his eyes slowly widen, and what else could describe that moment? It was like a switch flipped, and as if on cue, his ears turned red again. I laughed. He looked like Rudolph. Except instead of a red nose, it was his ears that were red.

You're so cute, number eleven!

His lips parted, and that's when I noticed—his lips aren't the only thing that can turn red today. I don't know why, but his lips were distracting me. They looked so soft…

"Are you serious, Kai?" he asked.

But I ignored that. I couldn't take my eyes off his lips. What would it feel like… to kiss them? Shit.

Stop imagining things, Kaizen!

I just want to see if they're really soft!

"Number eleven," I called him again. "Come closer."

"Huh? Why?" He asked absentmindedly, but he still leaned closer.

My smile widened, and before he could react, I pulled the collar of his polo shirt and kissed him on the lips.

I felt number eleven's surprise at what I did. But he quickly recovered, and I felt him cup both my cheeks to deepen the kiss.

Shit… his lips really are soft.

So this is what it feels like to kiss him. Once again, I saw fireworks and rainbows in the background.

And… I didn't want to notice, but how is he so good at kissing too? I'm completely overwhelmed. I don't want to stop. Sometimes the world is so unfair, isn't it? Is there anything he does that he doesn't excel at? Tsk.

One minute.

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

I don't know. I lost track of how long we were doing that.

But one thing's for sure—I didn't want it to end. I just wanted to keep kissing him.

So I almost felt annoyed when he slowly pulled away from me. Our eyes met immediately, and that's when I realized I was gasping for air.

I was already out of breath.

And that's also when I noticed how tightly I'd been gripping his shirt—it was all wrinkled. I let go immediately and looked back at him, only to catch him still watching my every move. I suddenly felt embarrassed. Especially when I noticed how messy his hair was now—and how much redder his lips were!

Shit. Did I do that?

Do I look the same right now?

"Baby," he called out, tilting my chin to meet my eyes.

He smiled.

My heart started pounding again.
I don’t know why, but I missed his signature smile.

"Number eleven," I called him too.

"I’m your boyfriend now," he said, as if making a declaration and not just casually informing me.

I slowly nodded and smiled back at him.

He leaned closer again. I thought he was going to kiss me again, but he just pressed our foreheads together. He took my hand and started playing with my fingers.

"I want to kiss you again," he whispered.

"Go ahead. I won’t stop you."

He laughed. "But you’re injured."

"So what? Are you going to kiss my knee?"

"I’m just afraid I might not be able to control myself—"

We both froze when we heard the door open. My eyes widened, and before I knew it, I had panicked and pushed number eleven away from me. I think I pushed him harder than I intended because he almost face-planted into the floor! I even heard him yelp!

I was about to apologize when I saw Mama and Tita Melba walk in.

Shit! They’re here? Why are they here? Oh, right! I’m injured!

What’s wrong with you, Kai? You got kissed by number eleven, and you forgot your knee hurts?

"Oh, handsome, what are you doing on the floor?" Tita Melba teased.

Forgive me, Lord, because I couldn’t help but laugh at number eleven’s position. He was sprawled flat on the floor, one leg awkwardly raised!

He glanced at me briefly, and I bit my lip. He frowned, then slowly stood up as if nothing happened.

Sorry, MVP!

"Good afternoon," number eleven greeted politely, blessing Mama and Tita Melba.

"Good afternoon, Roen," Mama replied. "You came to visit Kaizen?"

"Uh, yes."

"Didn’t I tell you, no need to do the mano anymore?" Tita Melba said, and the other just smiled. "But why were you on the floor? What were you doing there?"

I saw number eleven blink. It looked like he was struggling to come up with an excuse.

Shit, Kai, think of an excuse!

I cleared my throat. "Uh, I asked him to check something under the bed. It seemed like… uh, what do you call it again? A cockroach! Yeah, that's it. I thought I saw a cockroach crawling," I quickly said, then glanced at number eleven. "Was there one? Did you catch it?"

He blinked and momentarily gaped at me. I've already made up an excuse, baby! I hope you get it!

He cleared his throat, seeming to understand what I was hinting at. "Uh, there's no cockroach, babe—" he stopped himself, especially when he noticed I panicked again at what he said. "I mean, there's no cockroach, Kai."

"Is that so…" Tita Melba said.

"I'll take my leave now," number eleven said, so I immediately looked at him. He glanced back at me and smiled. I felt goosebumps rise when I noticed his lips were still red. "I'll pray for your successful surgery, Kai."

I wanted to say something, but Mama was already escorting him to the door.

"Take care on your way home, hijo. Thank you for visiting Kaizen, okay?"

"No problem, Tita."

Before he could step out, number eleven and I locked eyes again. He smiled at me once more and waved. I mirrored him, waving back until Mama closed the door behind him.

I don't know why, but I felt a little sad, even though I knew we'd see each other again in the coming days. Is this how it feels when you have a boyfriend? He hasn't even left the hospital yet, and I already miss him.

And I didn't even get to apologize for pushing him earlier. Tsk. You're in trouble, Kai. He might think I'm not ready to let the world know he's my boyfriend because I panicked earlier, worried someone might see us together.

Damn this brain of mine. It has a life of its own.

But what if that's really what he thinks?

Tsk. I can't stop overthinking, can I? But there's only one solution here—I just need to talk to number eleven. I don't want him overthinking either. I want him to always believe that I'm sure about how I feel for him.

"I really like that boy. Aside from being blessed with good looks, he's kind and respectful. He even visited Kaizen here," I heard Tita Melba say.

"He's single, right, Kai? Perfect timing! Your cousin Dianne doesn't have a boyfriend yet. Introduce them—"

"I don't want to," I interrupted Tita.

"What? Why?"

"Melba…" Mama scolded her, but she ignored it.

"Introduce them, Kai. Let your cousin experience having a boyfriend who's handsome and tall. The last guy she introduced to us had no looks, and his personality was terrible. He even cheated! What a shameless face."

"Melba, control your mouth."

"Why? It’s true. So before Dianne ends up becoming an old maid because of heartbreak, I’ll find her—"

"Roen... already... has... a boyfriend."

Tita Melba froze, and her gossip mode immediately activated, making me laugh.

"Really? Handsome has a boyfriend already? Do you know her?"

I know her very well. She’s right in front of you.

But I didn’t say that. Not yet, anyway. So I just shook my head, and the conversation shifted to my injury instead.

38

The day of my surgery arrived, and I was nervous. Aside from it being my first time undergoing surgery, I was also scared that it might not be successful. Thankfully, Mama and Tita were there to give me emotional support. They stayed with me until the surgery was over.

Coach and my teammates were there too. Jerome kept updating me about what was happening during their training sessions and actual games.

And of course, my boyfriend was there too.

Naks, Kai. Feel the feels.

But you know, number eleven was quite amusing. Before the surgery, if I was nervous, he seemed even more anxious than me. You could see it on his face whenever we had video calls, even if he didn't admit it. But at the same time, it was kilig-inducing to know that there was someone there for me, supporting me and sharing in my anxiety.

Thankfully, the surgery was successful.

Now, the next step is rehabilitation. I don't know how many months it will take or if it will last a year. It depends on the severity of the injury and how well I can handle the recovery process. So, my best friends in the coming days will be our S&C coach and physical therapist. They said that as long as I stay disciplined and follow everything they tell me to do, everything should go smoothly.

I hope I can return to training and playing soon. I don't know why, but even though Jerome keeps telling me that what happened was an accident, I still can't help but feel guilty. Everyone knows I'm the team's lone libero. Our new recruit isn't joining until next year.

And in the three games I've watched so far, I've noticed how much they're struggling with defense.

It's not like the team falls apart without me—actually, they've been winning, and they haven't lost yet as of now.

But those weren't easy wins. Four consecutive games went to five sets. Our sweepers, who are supposed to back up the defense (my role), weren't helping much, so our defense was clearly lacking. Thankfully, we didn't have any major issues with our offense, so that's how we managed to pull through.

Next up, Westmore is Creston's opponent.

Lord, please have mercy. What can our attacks do against a team that's good at breaking defensive patterns?

Especially since number eleven is so strong!

Speaking of number eleven, my baby requested a video call.

"Hello," I greeted him when I answered.

I saw him sitting… where exactly? Was he at Westmore? I knew he had classes today. I haven't been to Westmore yet, but it looked like their football field was in the background.

It's been two days since I left the hospital. After they dropped me off at the dorm, Mama and Tita immediately returned to Baguio. Coach also talked to Mama beforehand and assured her that I wouldn't be left alone throughout my recovery period.

But if you ask me, I'd rather recover in Baguio. I even thought about bringing our PT with me. He could stay in one of the rooms in the house. But of course, that's not possible. Plus, the semester isn't even over yet.

Tsk. It feels like so much has happened already, but the school year hasn't even moved forward. I've completely forgotten about the *student* part of being a student-athlete.

So here I am, alone in our dorm room since Jerome and Vince have classes. I'm just catching up on schoolwork.

Thankfully, number eleven called because I've been feeling lazy all morning.

"There's my baby," number eleven smiled. "Good morning, Kai."

"Did you get a free cut? Or did you skip class?" I asked.

"I'm just waiting for my next class," he replied. "Where's my good morning?"

Tsk. MVP really knows how to play this game. I never expected him to have this side—this flirty side. But I'm not complaining. It's surprising, sure, but it still makes me feel kilig.

"Good morning," I smiled.

"Good morning what?"

"What do you mean, good morning what?"

"You forgot something."

I furrowed my brow but quickly understood what he meant. Oh no. I don't know what to do with you, number eleven.

"Good morning, baby," I said. I felt weak when I saw his ears turn red, and he couldn't even look at me. He even stuck out his tongue to lick his lower lip, which was already red. Tsk. Is he really getting shy with me now? It's not like we haven't kissed before.

"Good," he nodded, looking satisfied with what he heard. "By the way, have you had breakfast yet?"

I showed him the oatmeal and sliced apple Jerome had prepared for me before leaving. "What about you? Have you eaten?"

"Yeah," he said. "What are you doing?"

I showed him my laptop. "Endless pending schoolwork."

"Oh. Did I disturb you?"

"Not at all. This is actually my study break. There's just so much I need to do."

"Want me to come over and help you out?"

"Outsiders aren't allowed here," I laughed, but if it were possible, I'd have him come over every day. "Don't you have class too? Are you cutting class?"

"But I miss you."

My lips parted in surprise. I don’t know what to do with you, MVP! Where did he even learn this? From his exes? Wait, did he have a girlfriend before? Or… a boyfriend? Come to think of it, I haven’t even asked him about that yet.

But all thoughts disappeared because he looked so handsome today. He always looks fresh in his school uniform, but I still prefer him in his jersey. Not only do I get to see his arms, which look like they’re ready to headlock someone, but I also love his jersey number, especially now that I know why it’s number eleven.

"I miss you too," I replied. "But your schedule is packed, right? You have training later."

"How about tomorrow?"

"You have class and training tomorrow based on the schedule you sent me."

"The day after tomorrow then?"

"You have a game then. We’re your opponents, remember? Have mercy on us, please."

"Will you be watching live?"

"Yes. But I’ll be supporting Creston, okay? You’re the opponent."

"But can I have a good luck kiss before the game?"

I froze, and number eleven burst into laughter. This guy really knows how to surprise me. It’s true what I thought before—my heart won’t die from cholesterol; it’ll die from kilig.

"You’re such a pest," I said, pretending not to be affected by what he said.

Of course, I had to act chill.

"Pest? What’s pest?"

"Pest means I love you."

I saw his lips part, and as if on cue, MVP’s entire face turned red. I laughed, but at the same time, my chest was pounding hard.

"Can you say it again?"

"What?" I asked innocently. "You mean *pest*?"

He nodded while staring intently at me. "That’s just a joke. It’s just an expression," I said, then smiled at him.

"But ‘I love you’ isn’t a joke."

I didn’t expect his face to turn even redder. But it wasn’t just him who was blushing today. I was too. I could feel my whole face heating up, and my system was going haywire.

"I love you too, Kai."

Shit.

It really feels different hearing it in Tagalog.

I don’t know why, but… it feels more real.

Especially coming from Roen.

"Baby," I heard him call me.

"Number eleven," I replied.

"I want to claim my good luck kiss right now."

"H-Huh?"

"But I still have class. Can you give me an hour or two?"

At first, I thought number eleven was joking, so I didn’t take him too seriously. But when I saw him standing right outside our dorm room, I almost dropped my crutches.

"Hi," he said with a big smile.

"Oh my gosh, what—"

"Can I have my kiss?"

I gaped at him. What was he doing here? How did he even get in? What about the guard downstairs? Or was this just an apparition I was seeing? Was he really here in front of me right now?

I confirmed he was real when he approached me and kissed me.

And I found myself responding to his kiss.

Damn… I really missed number eleven.

39

"Good luck, cap," I said to Jerome as we were on the bus heading to the arena.

It’s game day today against Westmore University. I asked our coaches if I could come and watch live, and they gave me the go signal. Good thing they allowed me because I already told number eleven that I’d be watching.

Actually, number eleven didn’t even want me to watch live. He said it might stress my knee. But I assured him I’d be fine, and our team’s physical therapist would be with us just in case.

I managed to convince him, but he still suggested I use a wheelchair. I don’t know if he was joking or not.

Then I joked about whether I’d need a neck brace too, just to complete the look if I were to use a wheelchair. But I forgot that number eleven is a rich kid because he didn’t get the context of my joke. He’s used to air-conditioned comfort, after all.

Sorry, number eleven. I grew up in the cold of Baguio.

He even scolded me, saying it’s bad to joke about needing a neck brace. He told me not to think like that.

Kaizen got scolded again.

"Thanks, Kai," Jerome replied, grinning at me. "Are you wishing me good luck now because you’ll be cheering for Alejo later?"

"No way. Creston U till I die," I said, and we both laughed.

"But tell your boyfriend not to play too well. It’s just college volleyball, after all."

"I already told him. He said he’ll try."

"What a killjoy. Isn’t he going to forego his playing years? Is he really going to stretch it out? Tell him not to. The national team needs him."

I just laughed again and shook my head.

But seriously... I’m still not used to Jerome and the whole team knowing that number eleven is my boyfriend. I told them last night while they were resting during training, and I was surprised they weren’t shocked. They even congratulated me, and honestly, I wanted to cry, but I held it back because I knew they’d tease me for sure.

But yeah, it’s just heartwarming and feels so good to see that none of them judged us. It’s so nice to see them happy and supportive of me and number eleven. They just asked when they’d get to meet number eleven, and I said maybe after the season.

So, to my boyfriend, sorry.

I’m really Team Creston U. The best team, win or lose. I didn’t make a mistake choosing this school.

They also said they wouldn’t spread it around to avoid gossip. I agreed, not because I’m not proud or because I’m ashamed of being in a relationship with number eleven. They’re right. It’s to avoid drama and judgment from others. Fake news spreads so quickly these days.

If someone asks, I’ll answer.

But as much as possible, I'd rather keep things private between me and number eleven.

"Kai, can you lock Alejo in the bathroom? I'm already scared of him," Vince said.

"Yeah, Kai. I still have trauma from him. Because of him, my finger got broken," Kiko said, wiggling his ring finger.

"You guys are weak," Paul said, then looked at me. "Kai, you won't get mad if I trash-talk Alejo later when I block him, right?"

"The question is, can you even block him?" Jerome said.

"Oh, you're asking for it! Why don't you grab the captain's ears if you're so brave?"

"Even if I grab both ears!"

I just shook my head as they kept trash-talking. They were scolded by the coaches several times, but they kept at it until we arrived at the arena.

The team went straight to the dugout, and I headed to my designated seat. I was with the always-smiling team physical therapist, Ms. Aira. The game between Easton and Northville was still ongoing, but when I looked up, I was surprised to see myself on the big screen. I heard cheers from the crowd, so I just looked down and focused on not falling because that would be even more embarrassing.

Damn it. Everyone could see me struggling to walk.

When I finally sat down, I could feel people still looking at me, but I ignored them. I just enjoyed the game and noticed more people coming in.

Is number eleven here yet?

I messaged him earlier that I was on my way, but he hasn't read it yet.

"Kaizen, right?" I was a bit startled when someone spoke beside me. I stopped using my phone and looked over. It was... who was this again? I know he's the opposite hitter for Westmore...

Wait, he's number eleven's teammate, right? But it seems like he's not playing. Aside from wearing a polo and pants, I also noticed his arm was in a cast.

So, I'm not the only one injured.

"Hi," I said and gave a slight bow.

"You remember me?" He grinned. His teeth were white and perfectly aligned.

"Uhm, yeah. You're a player for Westmore, right?"

"Go on. What's my name?"

I blinked. That's it. I couldn't remember.

He laughed when I couldn't answer. "Carlos Yu. Number thirteen. Opposite hitter of Westmore University's men's volleyball team. At your service," he said, playfully saluting.

"Ah, sorry, I remember now," I said.

"Remember it, okay? Because it seems like Roen has no plans of introducing you to me."

I awkwardly smiled and nodded. I didn't really know what to say to him.

"Don't get me wrong. It's not like I'm trying to steal you from Roen or anything. I'm his best friend, in case you didn't know," Carlos said, shaking his head when he saw my mouth drop open at the information he just shared. "I knew it! Looking at your face right now, I can tell that idiot hasn't even mentioned my name to his boyfriend. Not even once, really?"

I was even more stunned by what he said last. So, he already knows I'm number eleven's boyfriend?

Of course, Kai! He's his best friend, right?

"Uhm, no, he hasn't," I shook my head.

"That asshole. You'd think I'm not his best friend. If I hadn't introduced myself to you, I doubt you'd even know I exist in his life."

I blinked. "I-I didn't know."

I blinked again when he suddenly smiled, as if he wasn't just annoyed earlier. "But it's fine. He's a bit possessive. But don't worry, Roen's a good guy. He doesn't bite."

He just kisses.

I shuddered at the sudden intrusion of my thoughts. Tsk.

"Oh, I also just want to say, I'm very happy for you guys. Finally, you noticed him. Did you know he's liked you for a long time? When he found out you were at Creston, he barely slept the night before our game against you guys. Before we went to bed that night, we already stalked you on IG. Don't tell him I told you, okay? I'd be in trouble."

Carlos laughed, and I just nodded.

My heart was racing. I came here for the game, but I didn't expect number eleven's best friend to drop bombshells on me.

But I'm not complaining. He's talking about number eleven, after all.

"Uhm, what happened to your arm?" I asked, pointing at his cast.

"I got this from training," Carlos shrugged. "It's a shame, really. I was so excited to play against you guys. Especially you. You always block my spikes. Your floor defense is so frustrating. You're really good," he said, giving me a thumbs up.

I smiled, feeling both happy and shy at the same time. That was quite the compliment, coming from one of Westmore's top players. But then again, it's my job to block all their spikes.

"Thank you," I said. "You're amazing too. You hit really hard."

"Nah. I'm not satisfied because you can still defend against me," he replied. "Did you know Roen always scolds me whenever I target you with my serves and attacks?"

"R-Really?"

Carlos nodded. "He says I might give you a facial hit. I think he’s scared because I gave you one once, right?"

Yeah, I still remember that. My nose bled. But come to think of it—if he hadn’t given me that facial hit that day, would he have messaged me on IG? Would we have even talked? Would we have become… us?

"By the way, Kaizen," Carlos said, pulling my attention back to him.
"Get well soon. I’ve had an ACL tear before too. It heals fast as long as you follow your PT’s instructions. But don’t rush it. Just take your time. Before you know it, you’ll be back on the court."

I smiled. "Noted. Thank you. I hope you get better too."

"Of course," he grinned. "But who are you cheering for later?"

"Creston," I answered quickly.

"Very good," he said, raising his uninjured hand for a high-five, which I returned. "I’m cheering for Creston too."

I laughed. "Why?"

"So we can see how mad your boyfriend gets. His baby is sitting next to me, and he’ll probably hear me cheering for Creston. Isn’t that fun?"

I just shook my head. This best friend of number eleven is something else. He’s so different from him. How did they even become best friends?

We went back to watching the game. Carlos turned out to be pretty loud too because he kept shouting every time Easton or Northville made a good play. And what was the result? The camera kept focusing on our side.

I was starting to get a little annoyed—not at Carlos, but at the cameraman. I know he’s just doing his job, but why do we keep getting screen time? We’re not even playing!

And this guy next to me—smiling and waving. People were shouting because of him.

"That was intense," Carlos commented after the game ended. Easton won, but the game was really intense, especially in set four.

We waited a few more minutes for the second game to start. The arena was packed now. It felt like a championship game. But honestly, it’s exciting to see so many people supporting men’s volleyball. I hope this continues.

"Who do you think will win? Creston or Westmore?" Carlos asked as we watched the Creston team come out for their official warm-up.

Hasn’t Westmore come out yet? I want to see number eleven already. This is the first time I’ll see him in his jersey live since before.

I also planned to sneak a photo of him while he’s warming up. For my wallpaper, of course.

"I’d like to say Creston, but you guys are just too strong," I told Carlos.

"What if I told you I know an easy way for Creston to win?"

I turned to look at him, and he was smirking now. His smirk had that mischievous look, like he was up to something.
"I'll whisper it to you," he said, leaning his face closer to my ear.

I waited for Carlos to say something, but instead, I heard the crowd cheering loudly. I looked toward the court and my lips parted in surprise when I saw the Westmore players finally coming out.

Leading them was number eleven, frowning and looking irritated as he briskly walked in our direction.

40

My heart was pounding as number eleven approached. I wasn't sure if it was because that's just my default reaction whenever I see him... or because I was nervous for his best friend's life.

Just look at number eleven. I'm sure that once he gets close to us, he'll add another injury to the guy sitting next to me.

And speaking of the guy next to me, is this the "easy way" Carlos was talking about for Creston to win? Pissing off number eleven? This guy is something else. Meanwhile, I don't like seeing number eleven upset.

He's handsome, yes, but number eleven is scary when his eyebrows are furrowed.

"Here comes the green-eyed monster," Carlos whispered, still managing to laugh.

I didn't look at him. I didn't speak either. I just kept my eyes on number eleven, who was taking long strides toward us. It was like he didn't care about his surroundings anymore, even as people cheered or his coaches and teammates called for him.

I took a deep breath. Based on how he was acting now, it seemed like I was the only one fighting for the privacy I wanted for the two of us.

I quickly thought of what to say to number eleven once he got closer. I couldn't even stand because of my knee, and I didn't know why I had to explain myself when it was his best friend who started this nonsense.

I get why number eleven didn't want to introduce me to Carlos. This guy is also a troublemaker.

And he has a game today. What if he gets distracted and it costs Westmore the game? I don't want them to lose because number eleven is upset. Yes, I want Creston to win, but in a fair way. It feels better to win when you've worked hard for it.

But before number eleven could reach us, his teammates caught up to him and pulled him away to warm up. At first, he resisted and struggled, but it seemed like one of the coaches scolded him, so he had no choice.

The official warm-up for both teams started, and I was a bit concerned about number eleven because he was clearly distracted. I caught him glancing in our direction several times instead of focusing on the warm-up.

We made eye contact, and I just smiled, but it didn't seem to help. His forehead was still furrowed, and he was still scowling.

Okay. I don't like it when he's jealous either.

I used to think a little jealousy in a relationship was cute. But it doesn't feel good. It's like number eleven is a poor puppy who can't get close to his owner right now...

Wait. Puppy, Kai? That guy is more like a giant dog.

But that's not the point! Tsk.

I heard Carlos laugh, so I turned to him and frowned.

"Told you, Roen's possessive. And I'm just sitting next to you, huh?" He shook his head. "I already knew that he's in love with you, but seeing him like this? I didn't know he's that whipped."

"No wonder he didn't introduce you to me," I said. "Is this the 'easy way' you were talking about?"

"Woah," he raised one hand in the air as if surrendering. "I just made a suggestion. But I'll admit, I got a little scared earlier. I felt like he was going to break my other arm too."

I just shook my head. If he keeps provoking number eleven, it might not just be his arm that gets broken.

Now I don't even know who I want to win. Of course, by default, I'm rooting for Creston. But there's a 10% part of me that wants Westmore to win so number eleven's mood improves.

"Hey, don't think too much about it," I heard Carlos say.

"About what?" I asked, frowning.

"I can see it in your face. Roen's fine. A little jealousy won't kill him."

"You shouldn't have done that. They have a game, and you upset him. I'll point to you if they lose. You'll be in trouble with your teammates."

"I'm the one who should be upset with Roen. Imagine, he's jealous of his best friend? Come on! It's like he doesn't even know me. You're cute, Kaizen, but you're not my type. No offense meant."

I was about to respond when the crowd erupted in cheers again. I looked at the court and immediately searched for number eleven. I saw him looking up, so I followed his gaze.

And my eyes widened when I realized it was me and Carlos on the screen!

"Say hi to the camera, Kaizen!" Carlos waved, causing the crowd to cheer even louder.

I don't know why, but I couldn't move. I just stared up at the screen, probably looking like an idiot, and before I could react, the camera shifted to number eleven! The whole arena could see his unreadable expression.

What's worse is that I could hear Carlos' triumphant laughter again, which annoyed me.

Tsk. I just wanted to watch the game...

"Wearing jersey number eleven, outside spiker from Westmore University, Roen Alejo!"

The arena erupted in cheers again, and soon the game started. You know how in anime, when the main character is upset, a dark aura surrounds them? That's exactly what number eleven looked like right now.

And that's what I was saying earlier. He was clearly out of it, making error after error right from the start of set 1. I wanted to calm him down with just a look, but he wasn't glancing in our direction anymore.

And it didn't help that Carlos was loudly cheering for Creston. People and his teammates were already giving him looks, but he seemed to be enjoying himself even more.

Tsk. Out of all the seats in this arena, he had to sit next to me?

"Hey, why aren't you cheering? Your team's ahead," Carlos said.

I just frowned at him, but the guy just laughed. I don't even know where he got it, but he handed me a white balloon with the words *Go Creston U!* written on it.

He was really committed to teasing his best friend.

I looked at the scoreboard. The score was 18-15. Creston was indeed ahead, so I felt a bit more energized. It's rare for us to lead against Westmore early in the game. Their team doesn't have a habit of starting slow. They go all out even in set 1.

That's why it's so unusual to see number eleven making more errors than points. But his coach still didn't take him out because number eleven is the type of player who should always be on the court, even on an off day.

He's that good and reliable.

To the point where I still can't believe that the guy who's currently erasing my team's lead is my boyfriend.

"What the hell just happened?" I heard Carlos say as Westmore took the lead thanks to number eleven's consecutive attacks.

Shit.

18-15 turned into 18-24 real quick. Set point for Westmore University.

I just blinked. Even I couldn't believe that Creston's score got stuck just because of number eleven!

His forehead was still furrowed, and that dark aura still surrounded him, but his national team-level play had returned.

Carlos and I made eye contact. He just grinned at me and shrugged.

Is this the "easy way" for Creston to win? Because it seems like it only motivated him to finish the game quickly. Set 2 started with an 8 to 1 run for Westmore.

It might've been easier if I had just locked number eleven in the bathroom before the game.

It's not like I'm saying I'm a huge loss for the team, but it's clear now that we don't have a natural libero playing. One of our outside spikers, Josh, was converted to libero at the last minute, and his passing isn't stable yet, so Jerome can't create plays.

And I hate the feeling of not being able to help the team.

Just sitting here on the sidelines, watching them get beaten so quickly.

Tsk. I hope I recover soon.

"Westmore University now at match point!"

The crowd erupted in cheers. It's set 3, and the score is 24-12. We're getting crushed. I could see the frustration on Jerome's face, but I still cheered for them loudly. Carlos joined me, saying he didn't care if he got bashed or disowned by the Westmore community.

But I stopped cheering when number eleven and I made eye contact.

Wow... this is the first time he's looked at me the entire game, and his forehead is still furrowed?

The referee blew the whistle. Westmore's setter was about to serve, but my mind was no longer on the game. It was on the jealous baby who looked so good in his black jersey.

We kept staring at each other. Number eleven still looked serious. But I was desperate to calm him down, so I smiled at him. And I don't know what came over me, but I even winked.
Stop being jealous, baby.

I almost laughed when I saw his eyes widen and his ears turn red. Then he seemed to lose focus because he didn't notice Drew attacking, and he didn't block! He just stood there! Point for Creston!

"What the hell, Alejo?!" Carlos shouted.

I was just stunned.

I didn't know whether to feel giddy because he got flustered by my wink or to laugh and scratch my head because he gave us an easy point. Good thing they were still far ahead.

I saw his teammates talking to him. He seemed to explain himself, but his ears were still red. That's when I laughed. Carlos asked me what happened, but I just shook my head. I wouldn't tell him that his best friend got distracted, or he'd tease him even more.

And after number eleven's brief *sabaw* moment, he quickly made up for it. He even delivered a super spike to finish the game, causing Westmore's supporters to erupt in cheers.

But in the middle of their team's celebration on the court, number eleven still managed to catch my eye.

"I love you," I saw him mouth with a smile.

The upset Roen was gone.

We were okay again. I smiled back.

41

"People these days," Jerome said, shaking his head as he drank water and rested during training. "They're so quick to spread gossip."

"Yeah. Just sitting next to someone, and suddenly they're a couple?" Vince added.

"Just whispering to each other, and now they're close?" Kiko chimed in.

"You laugh together today, and tomorrow there's already a Tiktok edit of you," Paul said, laughing.

"Who even started this whole shipping thing with volleyball players?" Jerome said again. "It's scary being on camera now. Tomorrow, someone might ask if Vince and I are together."

"Sorry, cap, you're not my type."

"You idiot! You make it sound like you're the one losing out!"

"Damn it. Jerome and Vince! JerVin! It sounds terrible, but I support it!"

They all laughed and started wrestling, with Jerome and Vince leading the way. I just shook my head, especially when the others joined in. Instead of saving their energy for the drills later with the coach, here they were, roughhousing.

"But, Kai, what did Alejo say? Have you talked?" Jerome asked.

"I think he's jealous."

"You idiot. Your boyfriend went super saiyan during our game. He was so angry! He wanted to hurt someone!"

"I didn't even block him during the last point. My arm might've broken."

They laughed again, and I just took a deep breath.

"Are you okay, Kai?" Drew asked amidst the team's laughter.

I sighed.

Honestly, I don't even know anymore.

I don't know whether to be annoyed, laugh, or just ignore the fake news spreading on social media. This is why I don't spend much time online, except for my IG, which is full of bunny videos.

How could I not be bothered? There's a video circulating now of pictures of me and Carlos when we watched the Creston versus Westmore game. Whoever made it really put in the effort to compile stolen shots of me and Carlos. I was even caught with my mouth open in some of them. Then they added background music! And filters! And emojis! Unbelievable.

I don't even know who made it or where it came from. I don't know whether to be amazed or stressed by the person who uploaded it because they clearly have too much time on their hands.

But if it were up to me, I wouldn't pay attention to these things because there's really nothing going on between me and Carlos. Besides, this isn't the first time something like this has happened. It's even worse in women's volleyball.

I once saw a video where two players just glanced at each other across the net, and fans already created an issue and imagined all sorts of things.

It’s confusing what they’re actually watching. The game or the players’ reactions and interactions?

Don’t get me wrong. Not all fans are like that. But some have made it a hobby to spread false information, and what’s worse is that many people believe it.

Like now.

I was shocked to find out that Carlos is supposedly my boyfriend.

So... my actual boyfriend is upset again.

I already had a hard time calming him down, and now he’s faced with the idea that his baby is someone else’s baby.

"Hi," I greeted number eleven when we video-called. I was in the dorm lobby, just finished with my PT session.

Number eleven, on the other hand, had just finished training. He was already in bed, ready to sleep, but he insisted on calling first because we hadn’t talked all day since we were both busy.

I could see the air conditioner in his room turned on in the background, but he wasn’t wearing a shirt. Isn’t he going to catch pneumonia?

He looked at me with sleepy eyes. But his forehead was furrowed, and he was clearly in a bad mood.

He didn’t even greet me back.

The baby is really upset.

"Aren’t you cold?" I asked.

He just shook his head.

"At least wear a sando," I said. "The air conditioner is blowing directly at your back."

His phone shook, and he disappeared from the video. A moment later, I saw him again, now wearing a white sando. I smiled. Very good, number eleven.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"Not good," he replied, his eyebrows furrowing even more. "I want to break Carlos’ other arm."

I held back a laugh. "Don’t do that, number eleven. That’s bad. He’s still your best friend and teammate."

I remembered Carlos’ message to me earlier. He said he wouldn’t show himself to number eleven for now because he might break his neck too.

"I hate him," number eleven said.

"Just ignore the video. I’ll send you a selfie of me. Watch that instead."

I laughed at what I said, but it had no effect on number eleven. He was still scowling.

"That should've been me," I heard him say.

"Huh?"

"I should've been the one in that video with you."

My lips parted, and I burst out laughing when I realized what he said. I was even surprised because he spoke in Tagalog! Is jealousy the only thing that can make number eleven speak Tagalog?

I saw his face turn red, which made me laugh even more. He hid his face in his pillow. Oh, number eleven. What am I going to do with you? I just want to keep you in my pocket.

"Stop laughing, please," he said.

"Because really! I thought you were upset because of that video. Turns out, you just wanted to be the one in it with me? You want a Tiktok edit of us too?"

He peeked out from his pillow. "Why not?"

I just shook my head. What happened to my agenda of keeping things private and lowkey with number eleven if he's like this? I might wake up tomorrow to find a video edit of us, and it might even come from him.

"Should I do something so that people will also make videos of us two?"

"You're such an idiot," I said, laughing.

"I'm serious, though," he said, his forehead furrowing again. "I want people to ship us together instead of you and my damn best friend."

"Wow. You even know the word 'ship'? Where did you learn that?"

But he ignored that. And that's where our conversation revolved until we both got sleepy.

The days passed by quickly. So quickly that I couldn't even catch up. Finals week is almost here. I've been having therapy and rehab sessions for my knee almost every day. I can already walk without crutches, but I still have a compression wrap and need a bit of assistance when walking.

The season also continued. It's heartwarming that Creston finished the first round of the elimination rounds with a 6-1 win-loss record. Of course, the team manager treated everyone, while the coach reminded the team to step up their game in the second round, especially against Easton, because they'll surely come back stronger against us.

But I just want to commend the whole team. I'm so proud of them because they really fought hard, even though most of their games went to five sets. It's making me even more excited for my recovery.

That's why I'm really focusing on my rehab. As much as I want to heal quickly, I'm not rushing my body. Trust the process, as they say.

What's annoying, though, is the issue about me and Carlos. That hasn't gone away. It might've even gotten worse because almost everyone I know is asking me if it's true. Of course, I deny it and brush it off.

That’s when I also appreciated Carlos because he messaged me. He asked how I was doing, and we just laughed about it. Because it’s really not a big deal.

It was just one fan who made that video, but it’s easy to deny if someone asks.
What I didn’t expect was when the fake news reached my relatives and my mom. And honestly, I had forgotten that I hadn’t told them yet because of everything going on with me.

"Kaizen, is it true? Do you have a boyfriend?"

My mom confronted me directly during the call. What I thought wasn’t a big deal for me turned out to be different when it reached Baguio. She didn’t even ask about my injury. She seemed more concerned about whether the news she heard was true or not.

And based on the tone she used at that time, I’ll admit, I got scared.

It wasn’t her usual sweet tone when she asks questions. It felt like there was... weight to it. Like she was demanding an answer that she would approve of.

It felt like I was given a preview of how she’d react when I introduce number eleven.

"He’s not my boyfriend, Mom."

"Then why is there a video like that? Why would people think that, Kaizen?"

I struggled to come up with an explanation. That’s when I got nervous. How do you explain to your parent that fans ship players together like that? My mom might not even be aware of the word *ship*.

"Is he your teammate, Kaizen?"

"N-No, he’s not—"

"Is he from another school?"

"Mom, he’s not my boyfriend."

My boyfriend is someone else.

I wanted to say that, but I realized I needed to talk to number eleven first so he wouldn’t be surprised that my mom already knows.

But how can I say it when my mom’s approach is this aggressive?

I also thought about his parents. Would they react the same way as my mom when number eleven introduces me? When will that happen? Will I be ready if they don’t like me?

"Are you okay, baby?" number eleven asked that night. He had just come from training and looked exhausted, so I wanted to end the call quickly.

Plus, he has a game tomorrow. Against Easton, no less, and their unbeaten streak is on the line.

He also has a history of getting easily distracted. He takes after me, I guess.

So how do I bring up the topic?

"Huh? I’m fine. Just tired from what my PT made me do," I lied.

"I thought you had no session today?"

Shit.
"Ah, it was a last-minute thing," I said, awkwardly smiling.

"You sure you're okay, Kai?" he asked again. If he was sleepy earlier, now he was wide awake and giving me his full attention.

Tsk. And how did he know I was thinking about something? Did he just sense it? Or could he see it on my face?

"Absolutely sure," I said.

"You know that if something's bothering you, you can talk to me, right? I'm always here."

I nodded. I know that. But that's when the thought hit me—what if the people we love don't accept us?

Shit, Kai.

Why are you about to cry? Nothing's even happened yet!

"Number eleven," I called out, then looked down so he wouldn't see if my eyes were turning red.

"Yes, baby?"

I smiled and shook my head. "Nothing. I just miss you."

I couldn't see his expression anymore. I just looked down and pretended to be fidgeting with something.

"Give me 15 minutes. I'll come over. Wait for me, okay?"

It's late. The guard downstairs might not let him in. But I found myself nodding.

And in less than 15 minutes, he was in front of me, wearing a black hoodie and gray sweatpants. His hair was messy, and he was wearing his glasses, but he came straight here... to hug me.

42

It’s the last day of round 1 of the elimination round. And what else do fans look forward to during moments like this? It’s the battle between the reigning champions and last season’s silver medalists—Westmore versus Easton.

I’m both nervous and excited. It’s nerve-wracking because I know Easton is determined to get revenge on Westmore, but it’s also exciting because I know number eleven and his team won’t let themselves lose. But of course, the real winners here are the fans and supporters because, for sure, they’re about to witness a high-quality volleyball game today.

But aside from that, I’m a bit distracted too.

I can’t stop thinking about Mama. Last night, after number eleven left the dorm, I started wondering when would be the right time to tell her about me and Roen.

Someone even asked me earlier if something was wrong, but I didn’t say anything. He has a game today, so it’s better that I’m the one distracted instead of him.

This game is important, so I don’t want them to lose.

"Guys, who are you betting on?" Vince asked.

We’re already at the arena to watch the game live. With me are Jerome, Vince, Kiko, Paul, and Drew. There are already so many people, and almost everyone is wearing one of two colors:

Navy blue for Westmore.
Green for Easton.

I wore a navy blue t-shirt.

Of course, I’m supporting one team. I don’t care anymore if people make issues out of it. Number eleven would probably even like it if we got “shipped” in TikTok videos.

That’s why he even got a haircut yesterday, saying he wanted to look good in case we ended up in a TikTok edit.

As if he even has a TikTok account.

Jerome and the others wore white, claiming they wanted to look neutral and unbiased. But honestly, they just looked like they were ready to dance. Then again, Kiko said he’s wearing blue briefs to show support for number eleven’s team. They’re such goofballs.

"Westmore, of course. Alejo’s inspired because his baby is here," Jerome said as he handed over twenty pesos to Vince.

"I’m with Westmore too. What’s the point of wearing blue briefs if I don’t want them to win?" Kiko added, handing over his twenty pesos as well.

"Exactly. We’re Team Westmore," Vince chimed in, doing the same and pulling out his twenty. "Hey, Drew, join us. I’ll take your twenty."

"Westmore," Drew replied, and with no other choice, he joined their little bet.

We all looked at Paul, who was already pulling out his twenty pesos. "Sorry, Kai. Just to be different, I'm rooting for Easton."

"Alright then," I replied. "You're treating us if your team wins, okay?"

He laughed and nodded.

"Kai, what's this? You think you can escape just because your boyfriend's playing? Hand over your twenty too," Vince said, forcing me to pull out some money.

"Hey, we're on camera!" Kiko suddenly said, so we all looked up at the big screen above. My friends were waving and showing off, but I quickly looked away. That screentime again! And later, there'll probably be another video circulating online.

My phone vibrated, so I checked it. It was a text from number eleven.

"Are you already at the arena?"

"Yep. Good luck to you guys. Go Westmore!"

"Thank you, baby," he replied.

"Who are you with?"

"Jerome and the others."

"Are you sitting beside him?"

"Yep."

He didn't reply immediately, so I glanced at the court to see if the players were coming out for the official warm-up, but they weren't there yet.

Wait, is he thinking that maybe Jerome and I might end up in a video together? I smiled. Number eleven really is jealous.

"I'm surrounded by my teammates. No one's making a video, I think."

"So there's no empty seat next to you?"

"None."

"Good. I don't want to see Carlos sitting next to you again."

I laughed at his last message, which made Jerome and the others turn to look at me. They started shaking their heads at me, so I tried to hide my smile and casually tucked my phone away. Tsk. Caught being kilig.

"I wish everyone had a partner," Kiko said.

"Yeah. Then Kai wouldn't be the only one smiling today. There'd be two of us," Vince added.

They all laughed, and I just shook my head.

"Have you told them yet, Kai?" Jerome whispered.

I just smiled and shook my head. "Not yet. People still think Carlos is my boyfriend."

"But… do they know that…"

I didn't understand at first, so I furrowed my brow.

"That what? That I'm gay?" I laughed, and Jerome shyly nodded. "Not yet."

"But, Kai, you know… whatever it is, you know we've got your back. Just let us know if you need anything."

My smile widened. "Thank you, Cap."

"No problem, future captain."

My eyes widened. "What future captain? Don't tell me this is your last playing year?"

Jerome just smiled. "Not sure yet."

I was about to say something when we heard the announcement calling both teams for warm-ups. I glanced at Jerome, who was laughing and telling me not to think about it too much. But how can I not think about it when I have a strong feeling he won't be on the team next year?

"Kai, your baby's here," Vince said as the Westmore team came out.

And I don't know how number eleven did it, but he immediately found my eyes in the middle of the crowd.

He gave me a small smile while adjusting his jersey, which fits him perfectly, by the way.

I smiled back.

"Damn, Kai, he's looking at you! I'm getting kilig!" Kiko shouted, laughing loudly.

"You're such a pest, Kiko. That's Kai's moment," Paul teased.

"Don't ruin the mood, bro. This is one of the few times I get kilig, and when I pee too."

"You're like a worm sprinkled with salt, idiot."

"So many people are cheering for Alejo. It's different when it's a hot guy, huh, Kai?" Vince said.

I laughed. And that hot guy is mine.

"You guys are so loud," Jerome scolded them, and the group finally quieted down.

The official warm-up began. I observed number eleven, and he seemed to be in a good mood. A good mood meaning he's ready to unleash his inner beast against their arch-rivals.

The game started soon after. Damn, even the first set was intense. I already knew Easton was strong—they're the only team that's really challenged Westmore so far—but it seems like they really studied number eleven's moves this time.

Easton's blockers were tightly guarding him. If his spikes didn't get deflected by Easton's blockers, their floor defense was always ready to dig his attacks. Thankfully, Westmore's setter is sharp. Since their ace

spiker couldn’t score easily, he activated the middle blockers, creating sequences where number eleven faced only one blocker or none at all when it was his turn to attack.
Because of that, they won the first set, 25-22.

We cheered along with Jerome, not caring anymore if people were staring at us. I saw number eleven glance at our side. Our eyes met, and I was surprised when he tugged at his jersey and smirked.

Such a cocky baby!

"Alejo’s amazing! Damn!" Vince exclaimed.

"This is just a battle for silver now. Forget it! Let’s go home! Give the trophy to Westmore already!" Kiko joked, and we all laughed. The guy already gave up.

The game continued, and I wasn’t surprised when Easton took the second set, 28-26. Well, what else can you expect when these two teams face each other? I wouldn’t be surprised if this goes to five sets.

"Fight hard against Easton for my twenty pesos!" Paul shouted.

The entire arena was loud as the third set began. But unlike the first two sets, where the scores were close, number eleven turned into a scoring machine. Before I knew it, the set was over with a score of 25-16.

Westmore’s supporters erupted in cheers. We joined in too. Number eleven’s team was celebrating, while Easton’s players looked serious. But I hope it doesn’t go to five sets. Please, Westmore, finish this already!

Number eleven and I have a date later.

He said he wants to go to Tanay. He even asked the coaches if I could come along. I don’t know how he managed it or when he asked, but apparently, the coaches agreed, as long as I’m back before curfew.

Set 4 began, and the game was tight again until Easton suddenly pulled ahead by three points when the second technical timeout was called. The score was 16-13.

The Westmore players were also getting serious, and I saw number eleven listening intently to what one of their coaches was saying. A teammate handed him water and a towel.

Maybe he felt me watching him because he glanced in my direction.

And my eyes widened when he suddenly winked and smiled at me!

Damn, that was smooth.

I wasn’t prepared!

At the same time, the crowd erupted in cheers, and when Jerome nudged me to point at the screen above, I immediately knew why. The camera was focused on number eleven, and everyone probably saw what he did.

Shit... I just wanted to sink into my seat. I’m sure this will be a headline on social media tomorrow.

And my teammates just kept laughing. They kept looking at me and teasing me with their eyes. I wanted to frown, but my cheeks hurt from trying to hold back a smile.

"Westmore University now at match point!"

The entire arena roared. Wow... everything happened so quickly after the technical timeout. Easton was still ahead, but in a flash, Westmore took the lead. The score was 24-20.

And who else was responsible? Of course, the one wearing jersey number eleven. Their setter trusted him, and almost every ball was set to him. And if I were an Easton supporter, I'd be annoyed with him too because his points seemed automatic. The moment he was in the air, you could already count the point.

And that's it. Westmore University wins the game via a cut shot from number eleven.

He was named Player of the Game, and I saw him being pulled aside by the courtside reporter for a quick interview. His teammates immediately surrounded him, ruffling his hair.

Wow. I'm so proud of him.

That's why, even now, I still can't believe he's my boyfriend. He's so good at what he does to the point where I wonder why and how he even liked me.

Okay... I've made up my mind.

After this season, I'll introduce him to my mom as my boyfriend.

I don't know how they'll take it or if they'll even accept it, but I'll think about that later. What's important is that I tell them. I believe everything can be resolved through communication.

"Congratulations," I said to number eleven when we met in the arena's parking lot.

Jerome and the others had already left. They just dropped me off here when they found out I was meeting number eleven after the game.

"Thank you, baby."

Number eleven hugged me. He had just showered and smelled so good, which made me feel self-conscious because I was already sweating from cheering for them earlier.

When he pulled away, I tapped his chest. This guy really has no sense of privacy. Good thing there's no one else in the parking lot now.

"The camera caught your wink earlier," I said.

He laughed. "Well, I did it on purpose."

I playfully grimaced at him. "You're really pushing for us to have a Tiktok edit, huh?"

"Of course," he said, then quickly kissed my lips.

I panicked a bit because someone might suddenly appear out of nowhere. But number eleven just laughed at me and didn't seem to care.

"Now where's my congratulatory kiss? Hmm?"

I hit his chest again. "You already got one—"

But nope. Before I could finish what I was saying, he kissed me again. He's really cheeky sometimes. But I love it too.

"I love you," he whispered, then pulled me closer by the waist.

My heart raced at what he did, especially now that our bodies were so close. I found myself placing both hands on his chest. And my lips parted when I felt how fast his heart was beating too.

Our eyes met until I felt his lips on mine again.

There were fireworks and rainbows again.

But it didn’t last long when we heard someone call number eleven’s name.

"Roen?"

We both turned toward the voice. And I was shocked when we saw Nica Guerrero.

43

Do you know that feeling when your mom catches you stealing money from your dad's wallet while he's drunk?

That's exactly what's happening right now. I'm the kid caught stealing. Number eleven is the drunk dad. And Nica Guerrero is the mom who caught me in the act.

But it's not money she caught me stealing. The way she's looking at us now, it's as if I'm trying to take away his kiss, or even number eleven himself. Which, technically, is mine, but why does she make it feel like he belongs to her and no one should take him away?

Don't get me wrong—I'm not ashamed of number eleven or what we have right now. Like I said earlier, if anyone asks about us, I'll answer honestly. I'll tell the truth. It's private, but it's not something I'd hide.

Maybe because I was so shocked that someone saw us sharing such a private moment, I ended up pushing number eleven away from me with all my might.

But it seems like he anticipated what I would do because he immediately grabbed my arm and slid his hand down to hold mine.

Shit… we're still holding hands right now, in front of his ex-girlfriend!

And I almost panicked when I saw Nica Guerrero staring at our intertwined hands. But then I remembered—I can't even run away because I'm injured. Badtrip.

I tried to pull my hand away. But instead of letting go, he only held on tighter.

I pulled again.

He tightened his grip even more.

Shit… at this rate, my hand might end up injured too from how tightly he's holding it.

I looked at him, and the guy—oh my god—he's so chill, smirking while looking at his ex.

"Oh, my god," I heard Nica Guerrero mutter.

"Nics," number eleven said with a small smile. "What's up?"

Wait… *Nics*?

He has a nickname for her?

I pouted. My mood shifted instantly. Earlier, I was panicking, but now I feel like picking a fight. *Nics*? She could've just called her *Nica*, right? It's only two syllables!

Damn it, Kai, is that really what you're thinking about right now? Your priorities in life are messed up. Tsk.

But seriously… *Nics*? So corny.

"I'll step aside so you two can talk," I whispered, but number eleven just raised an eyebrow at me.

"No, baby," he said sweetly, smiling. Tsk. He even called me *baby* in front of his ex. Probably thinking calling me *baby* would overshadow his *Nics*.

“Roen,” Nica called out, so I turned to look at her again. She took a deep breath while still staring at our intertwined hands. “Y-You’re… gay?”

The tone of her question wasn’t angry… well, not entirely. It was more like a normal question mixed with shock, like she had just discovered something unbelievable.

“Yes,” number eleven answered, so I quickly turned to look at him. And before I could even process that, he lifted our intertwined hands. “This is Kaizen. My boyfriend.”

I blinked, my chest pounding.

Number eleven turned to me, smiling. “Kai, baby, this is Nica. One of my friends.”

Honestly, I didn’t know how to react. Did he just introduce me as his boyfriend? Is that what I heard? Because… damn, it feels so good.

“A-Are you kidding me?” Nica asked again.

“No,” he replied casually.

Silence.

An awkward silence enveloped the three of us. Nica’s eyes darted back and forth between me and number eleven. Her lips were parted, and her expression showed she couldn’t believe what was happening right now.

I saw myself in her—the same way I reacted when Reena told me about her gender preference. At first, I couldn’t believe it either, but eventually, I understood her.

“When… I asked you if we could get back together, is this the reason why you said no?”

My lips parted now. Did she try to get back together with number eleven? When? And did he reject her because of this?

Shit… I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be hearing this. This isn’t something I should be involved in. I tried to pull my hand away again, but number eleven still had no intention of letting go.

“Yes,” he calmly answered again.

Another awkward silence.

“Do your… parents know about this?”

“Yes.”

My eyes widened.

I thought nothing could surprise me more than him introducing me as his boyfriend, but there’s more. Did I hear that right? His parents… know about us?

Huh? Since when? How? And what was their reaction when they found out? Were they mad at number eleven? Disappointed? Sad?

Did they understand right away?

I couldn’t stop overthinking.

And I don’t know if number eleven noticed that I was overthinking again, but I felt him grip my hand tighter. I turned to look at him and caught him already staring at me with a smile.

"Nica? What are you doing here?"

A new voice suddenly interrupted us, and as if on cue, Carlos appeared beside Nica. Wait, so he was also watching the game earlier? I didn’t even notice him…

Nica just stood there, still staring at us, when Carlos turned to look at us too. When he probably realized what was happening, the smirk on his face disappeared, and he looked flustered.

"Oh, shoot," he said. We exchanged glances, and he waved at me. "Hi, Kaizen."

"Shut up, Yu," number eleven said.

"What? I’m just saying hi!"

"You knew about this?" Nica suddenly asked Carlos, and when he didn’t answer right away, she walked off.

"Wait, Nica—" Carlos called out, but not before giving us one last glance before following her. "Talk to you soon, Kaizen," he said with a teasing grin.

"No talking. Go away," my boyfriend quickly said, pulling me toward his car.

I could still hear Carlos laughing loudly, so I just shook my head. Number eleven helped me get into his car. That’s when I noticed it was different. It wasn’t the usual dark blue car. This one was black and lower, so it wasn’t hard for me to sit in the passenger seat. Once we were both inside the car, we looked at each other. His brow was furrowed, clearly upset, so I furrowed mine too.

"What talk is Carlos talking about?"

"Do your parents know?"

We both asked at the same time.

But damn it. Me, I’m troubled by the thought that his parents already know about me, and here’s number eleven, thinking about what his best friend said?

His lips parted. "Yes. They already know."

"Since when?"

"The day you said we’re officially boyfriends."

So, it’s been a while? Suddenly, I felt pressured. He’s already told his parents, and me? I haven’t yet. What, Kai? Should I wait until the season ends? Isn’t that what I decided?

"W-What… did they say?"

Number eleven smiled. His teeth weren’t showing, so I thought he was laughing at me now. I smacked his thigh, and he burst out laughing.

Look at him! Did he think I forgot about *Nics*? And you probably thought he wasn’t jealous earlier of his best friend laughing like that.

"Don’t laugh," I said.

"I can’t help it, baby. You look so cute when you’re stressed." I frowned. "You already know I’m nervous, and you’re still laughing?"

But he laughed again. "Don’t worry, Kai. They already like you. They actually wanted to meet you right away, but I told them to wait because I know you’re not ready yet since you’re injured."

I couldn’t speak.

I couldn’t believe what number eleven just said. Is it true? Do his parents… like me? Do they already approve of me for their son? Just like that? Is it really that easy? That fast? Didn’t they even ask questions? Didn’t they say anything hurtful?

And they already want to meet me?

Tsk. They haven’t even met me yet, and I’m already nervous.

I started thinking about what to wear. Formal? Smart casual? I also thought about how I should act, how I should smile in front of them, what gift I should bring, where I should take them to eat.

So many thoughts were running through my mind, and I don’t even know if I’m ready yet!

And I don’t even know if I’ll ever be ready.

Can we just play volleyball with his parents instead? Even if they facial hit me, I wouldn’t mind. Heck, I’d even let them use me as a net if they wanted to!

My thoughts were probably getting too deep because I almost jumped in surprise when I felt number eleven hold my hand.

I turned to look at him.

He was smiling warmly at me.

And just like that, my heart and mind calmed down. "Baby," he called. "Don’t think too much about it. If you’re not ready yet, I’m sure they’ll understand. I understand. I told you, we’ll take this slow, right?"

I slowly nodded.

"And as I said, they already like you."

"R-Really?" I asked.

I wanted to add that maybe his parents only said that so they could talk to me sooner. Then they’d give me a white envelope with a 10 million peso check. And then they’d tell me to stay away from number eleven.

And what’s worse is that I might actually accept the 10 million. It’s money, after all. Number eleven would definitely get mad, but I’d just kiss him and suggest we run away together using his parents’ money so he wouldn’t get mad anymore.

Shit, Kai. Did you really just think of that?

My brain really is something else.

"Yes, baby," number eleven replied, lifting my hand and kissing the back of it. "So, stop worrying, okay?"

I nodded as I watched him play with my fingers.

"Uhm, I'll tell my mom too," I said.

He looked at me again and smiled. "Okay. Let me know when so I can at least prepare myself."

"Prepare?"

"Yeah. I want to impress them so they'll like me as your partner."

I smiled, but then I suddenly felt a pang of sadness. Tsk. It's so unfair for number eleven if we don't get my mom's approval. His parents are fine with us, but what if mine aren't?

"What's wrong?" number eleven asked, probably noticing that I was overthinking again.

"Nothing," I replied, mimicking what he was doing. I started playing with his long, candle-like fingers. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to say thank you."

We looked at each other.

"Thank you because…" I continued, "…you gave me that facial hit."

Because if it weren't for that, we wouldn't have talked. He wouldn't have followed or messaged me on IG. We wouldn't be together now.

We both laughed.

Then we looked at each other again.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked.

"Wow. Before Nica came, you kissed me how many times without asking permission?"

"Are you saying I can kiss you whenever I want without asking?"

"Yeah, but what about *Nics* first?"

He froze. "Huh?"

"Nics, what's up?" I mimicked how he said it earlier. "You have a nickname for your ex?"

He didn't get it at first, but when he did, he burst out laughing. I was amazed because this might be the first time I've heard him laugh so hard.

Laughing like crazy, number eleven?

"Wait, are you actually jealous right now? Hmm?"

"The one who's jealous shouldn't be asking questions," I said, trying to keep a straight face.

But number eleven just laughed again. Wow. He’s so happy. Is he thrilled that I’m jealous? I mean, I’m not jealous, but is this how he’d react if I ever got jealous? Tsk.

"You’re laughing so much, but you were jealous of your best friend earlier," I muttered, crossing my arms.

And then I was the one who laughed when he suddenly froze like instant noodles, then turned to look at me again.

"You’re still not answering my question earlier. What talk is Carlos talking about?"

"We’ll talk about why you call Nica *Nics*."

And that’s what we argued about on the way to Tanay.

44

Creston started round 2 of the elimination round with a win. We're currently ranked 2nd in the team standings with 7 wins and 1 loss. Westmore is in 1st place with no losses, while Easton is in 3rd place with 2 losses.

Of course, the team is really happy because if we stay consistent until the end of round 2, we have a high chance of securing a twice-to-beat advantage going into the next round. But of course, the team also knows that we have to work hard for it.

It's not easy, especially now that all the teams have surely adjusted. We have the momentum, but it's not always in Creston's favor in every situation.

That's why, even though I'm not playing, I'm already nervous because our next opponent is Easton. For sure, they'll come back strong since we beat them in round 1.

I even got injured during that game.

And speaking of injuries, so far, so good with my rehab sessions. I can already move my knee a bit faster, so I can walk more comfortably now. Thank goodness our PT is really skilled and patient with me.

"Hi, baby," number eleven greeted me when he picked me up at the dorm that day.

The battle between Creston and Easton has finally arrived. It's also the first day of finals week at Creston, but since I don't have classes and I've already reviewed thoroughly, I decided to watch the game live.

This is an important game, so I'll support the team. If we win, it'll be a big boost for our final 4 campaign. But if Easton wins, our chances for the twice-to-beat advantage will be fifty-fifty.

They're a tough team to beat, but as I always say, the ball is round.

And since number eleven also doesn't have classes today, he's coming with me to watch. He even said he's hitting two birds with one stone.

Aside from not allowing Carlos to sit next to me just in case he watches, he also said there's a higher chance of us getting a Tiktok edit since we'll be sitting together if the camera focuses on us.

I can't help but laugh at this guy. He still hasn't given up on his video agenda.

I waited for him in the dorm lobby. I slowly stood up when he entered, and he quickly assisted me.

"Thank you," I said when he handed me an iced coffee. Wow. Sir even brought coffee. "You smell so good," I added, catching the familiar scent of his cologne.

He smiled smugly. "I'm always mabango (smelling good)."

I just shook my head and didn't encourage his arrogance. Well, it's not really arrogance because it's true—he always smells good.

Even when he's drenched in sweat on the court, he still smells like baby powder.

And he's really handsome today. I mean, he's always handsome, but his looks are even more enhanced by how he dresses. What he's wearing today—a black oversized shirt, cargo pants, and white sneakers—suits him perfectly. His hair is also down, so he has a bit of bangs.

It’s so unfair. When I wear an oversized shirt, it looks like sleepwear on me. When I have bangs, I look like a coconut.

I glanced at what I was wearing today. I wore a white shirt to show support for Creston, paired with washed denim jeans and Converse. I also brought a small sling bag for my phone and wallet.

I don’t think I look too shabby next to him, right?

But number eleven is just different. It’s like he always has a ring light with him.

"Number eleven," I called out to him as we were on our way to the arena.

"Hmm?" He glanced at me briefly.

"You’re so handsome."

I laughed when I saw him slowly turn red. It started from his ears and spread to his entire face. He’s definitely feeling giddy again.

"Your haircut suits you," I added.

"Did your barber survive cutting your hair?"

His forehead furrowed, and he glanced at me again. I bit my tongue. Oh, right. I forgot he grew up in air-conditioned comfort, so he only gets aircon jokes.

"Just kidding," I backtracked. "But you’re aware that you’re handsome, right?"

"Well," he cleared his throat, looking like he wanted to sink into the driver’s seat. "I haven’t given much thought to it..."

"Wow. Playing humble. Don’t you find yourself handsome when you look in the mirror?"

He laughed too. "Why do I feel like you’re just teasing me? Hmm?"

"No, I’m not! That’s a legit question," I said, even though I was holding back laughter. "And you’re so good at volleyball too. It’s like hitting the ball is so easy for you."

He laughed loudly and shook his head, but his ears were still red. Number eleven is so kilig (giddy) because of me.

"So promise me something," I said.

"Okay, baby. I promise," he quickly replied.

We both laughed, and then I lightly slapped his arm. "You don’t even know what it is yet."

"Whatever it is, I’m already promising."

"You don’t even know yet."

He just laughed again. "Alright. What is it, then?"

"If we ever fight in the near future, don’t hit me, okay?"

His eyebrows furrowed. "And what makes you think that I can do that to you?"

"You might suddenly hit me out of a burst of emotion."

"I'll never do that. You can hit me instead."

"It's just a hypothetical! I just don't want to end up like the ball when you hit it. I'm sure it hurts because look at your arm?" I squeezed his right bicep. "It's so big and firm—"

I froze when I realized how that sounded. I saw number eleven glance at my hand on his arm, and I quickly pulled it away like I'd been burned.

We exchanged glances after that, and luckily, he started driving again, so our staring contest didn't last long. I just looked out the window and asked myself if what I was seeing was a building—even though it really was a building.

Badtrip, Kaizen.

It got awkward all of a sudden!

Big and hard? Ugh, my mouth is so annoying. Tsk.

And… did it get warm? The aircon was pointed right at me, wasn't it?

"So, you like my arms, huh?" he teased with a smirk.

I could feel my face turning red now. The tables have turned, apparently. Tsk.

"I never said I liked your arms."

"But you find them huge and hard?"

That cheeky guy repeated it again!

And it seemed like number eleven found something to tease me about because by the time we reached the arena, he wouldn't stop talking about his arms. Then, when he helped me out of the car, he even rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and told me to hold on there. I smacked him for that. What a pest.

The arena was almost packed with supporters when we arrived. There had been another game earlier, so it was already buzzing with energy. Game 2 was Creston versus Easton, and just like before, only two colors dominated—green for Easton and white for Creston. Honestly, it was nerve-wracking but also exciting. I really hoped Creston would win.

It was finals week for us, too, so I hoped we'd win. It feels better to take exams after a victory. I pulled out my phone, took a picture of the crowd, and posted it as an Instagram story. I also sent a "good luck" message to the team in our group chat. I smiled when Jerome replied with a picture of the whole team.

Tsk. I really miss playing.

"Baby," I heard number eleven call out to me.

When I turned to look at him, he was just tapping on the screen of his phone. That sneaky guy was taking a picture! He was grinning ear to ear while my lips were slightly parted in surprise.

I was about to ask him to delete the picture when we suddenly heard the crowd cheering. Without thinking, we both looked up at the big screen above. And sure enough, the camera was focused on me and number eleven sitting together.

I quickly adjusted my posture.

This guy beside me was grinning like he'd won the lottery.

He almost waved at the camera, too.

"Finally," he whispered to me.

I shook my head, and number eleven just laughed. This guy was so happy. No wonder, since his dream of being caught on camera sitting next to me finally came true. He's really obsessed with TikTok edits.

And what if someone made a video and it reached my mom? Would I have to introduce number eleven to her sooner than planned?

Not long after, both teams were called out for the official warm-up. My attention shifted to the court, and I absentmindedly nodded when number eleven excused himself to go to the restroom.

I was getting nervous. How could I not be? The Easton players looked so serious. They really wanted to beat us, didn't they?

"Hi. Is this seat taken?"

I turned to the person who asked. My lips parted in surprise when I saw a tall, beautiful woman smiling at me.

"Uhm, no," I replied, gesturing to the seat on my left. Number eleven was sitting on my right.

She sat down, and I tried to refocus my attention on Jerome and the warm-up. But I couldn't help noticing from the corner of my eye that she was looking at me. I tried to ignore it, but I felt awkward, so I glanced back at her.

Her smile widened when our eyes met.

"You're Kaizen, right?"

I furrowed my brow, racking my brain to see if I knew her, but I was pretty sure this was the first time I'd seen her.

"Uhm, yes," I nodded slowly.

"I know Roen's going to be mad, but I couldn't wait any longer to meet you."

Roen? She knows number eleven?

I must've looked confused because she laughed and extended her hand.

"I'm Rian. Roen's sister."

When I heard that, my eyes widened, and I almost stood up—but I remembered my knee injury just in time. Shit… number eleven's sister was sitting right in front of me?

I wanted to smack myself because, honestly, I'd completely forgotten that number eleven mentioned having an older sister. It only hit me now as I stared at this woman and realized how much she resembled him! She was the female version of number eleven!

My hands were still trembling when I shook hers. She noticed and laughed again.

"Why are you shaking?" she asked.

Shit, why am I shaking? Calm down, Kaizen!

"S-Sorry," I even bowed slightly.

"Oh no, why are you apologizing?" She laughed again. "You're so cute. I've seen you in pictures, but you're cuter in person. No wonder Roen's in love with you."

Just like when I first met Carlos, I didn't know how to react to what number eleven's sister said. All I knew was that I was panicking. And why was number eleven taking so long in the restroom? Did he get swallowed by the toilet?

"It's so nice to finally meet my brother's boyfriend."

Number eleven's sister was smiling warmly at me, and she seemed genuinely kind. But for some reason, I couldn't fix my awkward smile. I probably looked like I was about to cry or something. Tsk!

"Don't be nervous! It's just me," she said, laughing. "I want to chat more with you, but Roen will definitely kill me if he finds out I introduced myself to you. He said he'd introduce you to us when your injury heals, but as an impatient person, obviously, I couldn't wait," she said, glancing at my knee. "How's it doing, by the way? Are you feeling okay—"

She suddenly stopped talking when we heard the crowd cheering again. There are only two usual reasons why they cheer like that—if it's not the players on the screen, then it's definitely someone from the audience.

And I was right. On the screen, there we were—me and number eleven's sister.

"Ate?" Number eleven suddenly appeared beside me.

And I don't know… one second later, he and his sister were bickering.

Next thing I knew, Easton was already dominating Creston.

And the following day, I was stressing over my exam because yet another video was circulating online—but this time, it wasn't me and number eleven. It was me and his sister.

And before I knew it, I was on the phone with my mom because she had seen the TikTok edit of me and number eleven's sister. She insisted I bring her to Baguio so she could "size her up."

I didn't know what to do anymore.

Maybe they should just facial hit me instead. Tsk.

45

I don’t know if I should be thankful that I’m injured right now, so I can’t go home to Baguio. It seems like my mom forgot that I’m still recovering because she’s been insisting that I bring number eleven’s sister home so she can meet her.

Honestly, that made me sad.

I don’t want to think about it too much, but... it really seems like my mom won’t accept me if I introduce number eleven as my boyfriend.

Just look at her reaction when the video edit of me and Carlos went viral compared to the video of me and number eleven’s sister.

She bombarded me with questions about the first one, but with the second one, it’s like she’s ready to send a bus to the dorm just to bring Ate Rian home.

Even if she doesn’t say it, I know she wants a girl for her only son.

I get that. But... is there anything wrong if I fall for a guy? Isn’t it possible for someone to fall for anyone, regardless of their gender?

What if that’s where you find happiness, right?

What if I tell them that I’m happiest when I’m talking to or spending time with number eleven?

Would that be enough reason for them to accept us? Or would that be the reason I can’t go back to Baguio? It might sound exaggerated, but it could happen, even though a big part of me is confident that my mom won’t disown me. Because if they disown me, they won’t have a child anymore, right?

That’s the thing. They didn’t make me a sibling. So they have no choice but to accept me.

But what if they really disown me?

Shit... I really don’t know anymore. I’ll probably just cry because, honestly, I don’t have a plan yet in case we don’t get my parents’ approval.

All I know is that I’ll fight for number eleven.

"Baby..." number eleven called out.

I absentmindedly turned to him. It’s Sunday, and hell week at Creston is over, so we finally had time to see each other. This week was really busy. So much happened. Aside from my final exams and rehab sessions, there was also the issue with the video of me and his sister.

If my mom hadn’t made such a big deal out of it, it wouldn’t have mattered to me.

And speaking of Ate Rian, well, that’s what she told me to call her. After she and number eleven had their sibling argument, she left right away. She didn’t even stay to watch the game. She said I was her main reason for coming that day.

And I’ll admit, I felt giddy when she said she liked me and that she was happy for me and her brother. She said she’s looking forward to my official meeting with their parents.

Yes, number eleven told me that we're approved by his family, but it's still different when you hear it directly from them.

It feels so good to know that you're accepted... that they accept me... me and number eleven. That's why it's really sad that it might not be the same with my family.

"Why?" I asked.

We're at a coffee shop here in Tagaytay right now. We just finished lunch and are now washing it down with coffee. And since Westmore has their hell week next week, number eleven also brought his reviewers so he can study.

"What are you thinking?" he asked in return. He even put down the book he was reading and gave me his full attention.

"Huh?"

"You seem distracted."

I blinked. "Really?"

I looked at the phone I was holding. I didn't even realize I had already finished watching the video of Creston's latest game against Easton, where we lost. That's what I was busy with so I wouldn't disturb him while he was studying.

"Care to share your thoughts? Hmm?"

I looked at number eleven and then took my iced coffee, which was now just coffee because the ice had melted. Thank goodness he's no longer upset.

Actually, I don't even know whether to laugh or feel sorry for my boyfriend.

I mean, when the video edit of me and his sister came out, I couldn't even talk to him properly. He said he even dressed up nicely, only for his sister to be the one in the video with me. He said he was hoping that by the end of that day, there would already be an *issue* about the two of us. Good thing I was able to calm him down.

Just one sinigang after their game, and he was fine again.

"Nothing... I'm just thinking about my exam answers."

I won't tell him about my mom yet. I'll talk about it later. I don't want number eleven to worry about it, especially since it's their finals week and the season is still ongoing.

Number eleven was about to say something when we both looked at my phone as it lit up. And I suddenly felt nervous when I saw that my dad was requesting a video call.

"Go ahead. Answer it," number eleven said.

"Is it okay? You're studying."

"It's okay, baby. Study break," he said, taking a sip of his matcha latte.

He also took one of my hands and placed it on his thigh, then played with my fingers.

I nodded and took a deep breath before answering my dad's call. I even wondered what time it was in Canada and why he was calling. And I almost wanted to end the call immediately, thinking that my mom might have already told him something. They video call almost every day.

"Hello, anak," my dad greeted with a smile. He was wearing a hoodie and looked like he was just in his apartment.

I smiled back. "Hello, Dad. How are you? No work today?"

"It's my rest day," he replied. "How about you? How's your rehab? Are you following your therapist's instructions?"

"It's going well. I can already walk on my knee."

"Good. Always listen to your coaches, okay? Don't be stubborn."

I nodded and briefly glanced at number eleven. He was still sitting beside me, fiddling with his phone while gently massaging my palm.

Casually, I looked around. There weren't many people in the coffee shop we chose, even though it was a Sunday. The closest people to us seemed to be a married couple, but they were lost in their own world. Thankfully, if anyone saw us now, they might just think we were being overly affectionate.

You're overthinking, Kaizen. PDA already? He's just playing with your fingers.

But my mind kept wandering. What if someone thought we were exchanging kisses or something?

I almost rolled my eyes. My brain really knows how to ruin the moment. How could I think about such things while talking to my dad? It felt ridiculous.

"Where are you, by the way?" Papa asked.

"Uh, here in Tagaytay," I replied.

"Oh? Who are you with there?"

That's when I realized number eleven had been listening because he quickly turned to look at me. Our eyes met, and suddenly I felt pressured about what to say to Papa.

Shit, what should I say?

Teammate? Friend?

Tsk. Some teammate and friend. Are there teammates or friends who kiss each other?

But no, he's really just a teammate, Kai? Would you lie to your dad and boyfriend? What if the situation were reversed? What if number eleven introduced you as just a teammate? Wouldn't you feel hurt? What's wrong with me?

I took a deep breath. Is this the time to come clean? Should I introduce number eleven? My dad is more understanding than Mom, but what if he gets mad? What if he yells at him?

"Uhm, why did you call, Papa?"

Thankfully, I was born quick on my feet. I did my best to appear chill in front of Papa, even though I was panicking inside.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s not that I don’t want to introduce number eleven, but I want to talk to Mom and Dad about it first. And I’ll do that after the season ends and when I’m back in Baguio.

It’s not just about my relationship with number eleven—I also need to talk to them about my gender identity.

And I know that topic will be heavy for them, so I need to prepare myself too.

"Ah! Your mom," Papa said with a big smile. "She said you have a girlfriend now?"

Tsk. I knew it.

I glanced at number eleven, who was focused on reading again but still holding my hand. So, his study break was over?

"Is that true, 'nak? She said you haven’t introduced her yet—"

"That’s not my girlfriend, Papa," I quickly interrupted. "I don’t have a girlfriend."

I have a boyfriend.

Papa froze. "Who is she then?"

"Uhm," I cleared my throat. "Just a friend."

"You’re not courting her?"

I felt number eleven stop squeezing my hand.

I looked at him and caught him pouting.

Shit… here comes part two of soothing Roen.

"No, Papa. I’m not courting anyone."

Papa paused for a moment. I immediately felt guilty, but… seriously, did both Mom and Dad believe that video? I watched it too, but it was just me and number eleven’s sister talking while sitting next to each other. What’s the big deal? Isn’t that normal? Do people automatically assume a man and woman sitting together are dating?

Were they swayed by the background music in that video? The filter? The heart emojis?

And why am I always the target of these rumors lately? Do I look like I’m searching for love in other people’s eyes?

Well, I already found mine.

The call ended with Papa reminding me to take care of myself. I told him I missed him and couldn’t wait for him to come home next year.

After the call, I leaned back in my seat. We didn’t talk much, but the fact that number eleven was right beside me while my dad was trying to set me up with a girlfriend drained my energy. Plus, he was so quiet.

I glanced at number eleven. He wasn't pouting anymore, nor was he frowning or furrowing his brows. He actually looked calm, still playing with my hand.

Tsk. I told myself I wouldn't mention my issue with my parents today, but here we are—he found out anyway.

"Number eleven," I called out to him.

He turned to me. "Yes, baby?"

I listened to the tone of his voice. He didn't sound upset, but I still felt guilty.

I mean, the opportunity to introduce him to Papa was right there. All I had to do was move my phone slightly, and number eleven would've been visible on the video call. One simple sentence:

"Papa, this is actually my boyfriend."

But I couldn't do it.

I didn't answer right away. Instead, I took his hand and intertwined our fingers. I noticed his lips part and his ears turn red as he stared at our hands.

Then I rested my head on his broad shoulder.

I took another deep breath and closed my eyes.

This wasn't the first time I rested my head on his shoulder, but every time I did, I felt incredibly relaxed. It was as if everything became light again.

And then there were our hands—there's a noticeable size difference, but somehow, they felt like they were made for each other.

"Sorry," I said.

"Hmm… for what?"

"For not introducing you to Papa earlier."

I felt him take a deep breath. "It's alright."

"It's not alright. I just needed to say you're with me here, but I couldn't."

I heard him chuckle softly. "Baby, remember what I told you before? I'll say it again, okay? We'll take this slow. There's no need to rush. If you're not ready yet, it's totally fine. I'm not going anywhere, and I can wait. I'll always wait for you."

I closed my eyes as I felt his lips press against the top of my head.

"But, god, I really hate my sister," he added.

I straightened up and jokingly smacked his thigh. "You're so mean to your sister."

"She beat me to it. Tss," he said, slipping into Tagalog. "We really need to work on that TikTok video, baby. I'm so tired of people—"

He stopped mid-sentence when I suddenly kissed him on the lips.
"Stop complaining. Go back to studying," I said, laughing.

But I immediately regretted what I did because number eleven stopped reviewing. He seemed to forget we were in a public place because he started kissing me back passionately.

46

"Kai, your birthday's coming up, right? Where are you planning to treat us?" Jerome asked, taking a sip from his tumbler.

I was sandwiched between him and Drew, while the three clowns—Vince, Kiko, and Paul—were lying down in front of us. The others were scattered around the school gym, resting after Coach's intense training session.

There were no more classes at Creston now. It was officially summer vacation, but that didn't apply to us. Since the season was still ongoing, everyone was focused on training and the upcoming games. Well, except for me, because my focus right now was on my recovery.

I was just feeling anxious because next week was the release of our grades. I had been so distracted during finals week. Tsk. I really hope I passed because if I don't, not only will my graduation be delayed, but I also won't be able to play.

I furrowed my brow at Jerome. "What's the date again?"

"April 3," Drew answered for me.

I immediately checked my phone. And yeah, it was already April? I hadn't even noticed. Time really flies when you're busy thinking and doing so many things.

Imagine that—I'm getting older again. In just eight days, I'll be 20. I won't be a teen anymore.

"Oh no, you're right…" I said absentmindedly, tossing a towel to Jerome and Drew. "Kai's birthday is coming up?" Kiko asked, pulling off his training shirt.

"Yeah, on the 11th. He's treating us, apparently," Jerome added with a laugh.

"I like that about Kai! How about an unlimited buffet?" Vince chimed in, already shamelessly suggesting ideas.

"I'm fine with samgyupsal, Kai," Paul said. "Thanks!"

"You guys have no shame!" Kiko interjected, sitting up. "For me, Kai, unlimited chicken wings will do."

"As for me, anywhere is fine. It's free, right?" our captain added.

I scowled at those moochers. "You guys should be the ones treating me! Whose birthday is it anyway?"

But it seemed like they weren't listening. They kept throwing out suggestions about where I should take them. It's like they thought I had some hidden stash of money.

"Advance happy birthday, Kai," Drew said, the most sensible one among them.

I smiled at him. "Thank you. You're the only one I'll treat," and we both laughed.

"All you guys think about is free stuff, but Kai won't even be around on his birthday," Jerome teased.

"Where else would he go?" I asked.

"Oh, right! For sure, he has a birthday date with his baby Alejo!" They all started shouting like idiots. I couldn't help but laugh, especially when Vince and Kiko started singing a song I didn't know the title of, but

it sounded familiar. They probably got it from TikTok after watching that video edit of me and number eleven's sister.
"So, Kai? Where's your date with Alejo?" Jerome teased, raising an eyebrow.

I didn't answer right away because, honestly, number eleven and I hadn't talked about or planned anything yet. I mean, not yet. I hadn't even realized my birthday was so close. If Jerome hadn't mentioned it, I might've completely forgotten.

Plus, I wasn't even sure if number eleven knew when my birthday was.

As for me, I knew his. May 27. I didn't ask him about it—he just happened to mention it once. Actually, I Googled it back when I was still daydreaming about him.

And speaking of his birthday, that's when I realized it's next month too!

What would be a good gift for him?

Aside from volleyball, what else does number eleven like? Should I buy him a bunch of sleeveless shirts? I mean, he always sleeps topless. His body must be made of steel or something because he hasn't caught a cold despite the freezing temperature in his dorm room. I discovered that aside from the air conditioner, he also uses an electric fan. Just thinking about it makes me feel cold.

That's what occupied my mind in the following days. And wow, I didn't realize how hard it is to think of a gift for your boyfriend. It's even harder when there's a gift exchange every December.

At least if I could just give him something simple like a tumbler or a hoodie, that'd be easier. But for sure, he already has plenty of those.

Why does your boyfriend have to be a rich kid, Kaizen?

It feels like he's already bought everything he could ever want. He has two cars and even a motorcycle. Should I get him a truck so he can experience driving that instead?

I took a deep breath as I got up.

I wasn't really in the mood that day because I still couldn't think of a gift for number eleven. It was also kind of sad to realize that I didn't really know much about him aside from the fact that he's amazing at volleyball.

What if… I treated him to a trip to Thailand?

Wow, Kai. That's ambitious. Do you even have the money for that? Maybe your budget only stretches as far as Tanay?

"How much is it…" I muttered while scrolling through my phone to check the price of plane tickets to Bangkok.

My wallet practically hid itself when I saw the cost. It was so expensive! And speaking of expensive, would number eleven still like me if I could only afford a one-way ticket? Tsk.

And even if I could afford it, the real question is—would my knee be able to handle it?

Oh well, who knows! There's still one month before his birthday. I still have time to think about whether I'll dip into my savings for a Thailand trip for the two of us.

I washed my face and brushed my teeth. I was a bit surprised that I was left alone in the room. Where could Jerome and Vince be? I mean, their training isn't until later this afternoon, right?

I went back to my bed, still feeling a bit dazed. I was about to stand up to grab some coffee when my phone rang. It was a video call request from Mama!

"Happy birthday, 'nak!" Mama greeted me as soon as I answered. I blinked, my lips parting in surprise. Shit… I looked at the calendar and realized—oh yeah, it's my birthday today!

"Thank you, Ma," I replied with a smile.

"Happy birthday, Kaikai!" Aunt Melba greeted me next.

"Thank you, 'ta."

We probably talked for about 15 minutes since Papa joined the call too. He even showed me the shoes he gifted me.

I thanked them and felt a bit sad that I wouldn't be able to go home to Baguio. Last year, we had a game on my birthday, and this year, I'm injured.

After the call, one birthday message after another started coming in, along with IG stories tagging me. I thanked my former classmates and friends from Baguio who greeted me. My cousins and other relatives also sent their wishes.

Even all my teammates and coaches greeted me. I wanted to hit Jerome and the others because they posted stolen shots of me. It was embarrassing, but whatever—it's already posted. I'll get back at them on their birthdays.

Even Creston's official page greeted me! I felt special because they greeted me on their main page. I liked the post and thanked them.

There were also messages from Reena, Carlos, and Ate Rian.

Reena, who never forgets my birthday every year. Carlos, who told me to message him immediately if number eleven ever upset me. And Ate Rian—her message made me blush and feel kilig:

"Welcome to the family, Kai."

I scrolled and refreshed my Instagram, but… there was still no greeting from number eleven. No DM, no PM. I even checked my inbox in case he texted me at midnight, but nothing.

Oh no… not good. It seems like our Thailand trip might already be canceled, huh?

Or maybe he's still asleep? It's still early, after all. Alright, I'll give him a chance. But if he doesn't greet me today, Roen Alejo, I'm telling you—no kisses for three months.

'Good morning, number eleven.'

I sent him a message, just in case he'd feel it, and then tossed my phone onto the bed. I stretched a little and decided to leave the room.

And you won't believe how shocked I was when I opened the door and found my teammates lined up in the hallway, holding balloons and letterings that spelled out:

‘Happy Birthday, Kai!’

So that’s why I was left alone in the room. I just stood there, mouth agape, and laughed when I noticed that Vince was holding the letter “K” upside down.

“Happy birthday, Kai!” they all shouted in unison, while Jerome popped a party popper.

I was smiling so big, and I don’t know—I suddenly realized I was tearing up.

“Thank you, guys,” I said.

“You idiot, Kai’s crying!”

“Kai, don’t cry! I’m crying too!”

“He’s crying! He’s crying!” And yes, I really cried. Those fools. They all laughed and approached me, but they didn’t crowd me too much because Jerome warned them that I might bump my knee.

“Happy, happy birthday, Kai,” Jerome said, pinching my cheek. “Get well soon. We miss you on the court.”

I laughed while still sniffling.

And amidst the chaos caused by the boys, my eyes landed on the guy standing a few meters away from us. He was holding a cake and balloons, smiling warmly at me.

My lips parted, and my chest began to pound loudly and quickly.

Number eleven is here!

“Kai, that’s the team’s gift for you. I hope you like it,” I heard Jerome say.

“What are you talking about, cap! Kai already loves it!” Kiko shouted, and they all burst into laughter.

I laughed too, but I couldn’t take my eyes off number eleven. He was even wearing a party hat, which my mischievous teammates must’ve forced him to wear.

“Let’s go! Let’s go! So these two can have their moment.”

“Kai, you and Alejo clean up these confetti, okay?”

Before I could even protest, those moochers quickly scattered. They even handed me the tarpaulin and letterings. I just shook my head.

I looked back at number eleven, who had already approached me. I looked up at him and blinked when he gently removed some confetti from my hair with one hand. After that, he stared at me and smiled.

“I really love your morning look,” he said.

I suddenly became self-conscious. I had already washed my face and brushed my teeth, but I was still wearing my oversized sleeping shirt and pajamas. My hair was also messy.

But number eleven? He looked fresher than the word “fresh.” So handsome. What a great way to start my birthday and morning. Good morning indeed, Kaizen, right?

“Good morning,” I greeted, unable to hold back my smile.

“Good morning,” he replied. “Happy birthday, baby,” he said, handing me the red balloons he was holding.

“Thank you,” I said. “So, you knew when my birthday was?”

“Of course,” he said smugly, lighting the candle on the cake he brought. “Make a wish.”

He smiled at me, so my smile grew even wider. Then I looked at the candle and closed my eyes.

I wished that my parents would accept me and number eleven.

I wished… that they would accept who I am.

And thankfully, I had already brushed my teeth, so I didn’t feel embarrassed blowing out the candle.

47

"What did you wish for?" number eleven asked after I opened my eyes and blew out the candle.

"You’re not supposed to say it, right? Otherwise, it won’t come true."

"Not even to your boyfriend?"

I laughed and smeared some icing on his nose. "Since when was there an exception that you can tell your wish to your boyfriend?"

"Fine," he pouted. "But if it’s my birthday, I wouldn’t wish for anything anymore."

"Why not? You could at least wish for world peace."

He laughed and smeared more icing on the tip of my nose. His smear was bigger than mine—probably because his fingers are bigger, or maybe mine are just small.

"Silly," he said, ruffling my already messy hair. "That’s because my wish has already been granted."

"And what’s that?"

"It’s you, baby."

I bit my lip to try and stop myself from smiling, but mission unsuccessful. My chest was pounding, and I could feel my whole face turning red. This morning just got even better, Kai!

Number eleven is such a flirt this early in the day. If the cake could talk, it would probably say, *Really? Right in front of my salad?*

"Are you kilig?" He had the audacity to ask the obvious!

"A little," I admitted, laughing. "It’s manageable."

Number eleven just laughed and pulled me closer by the waist with one hand. He kissed my forehead, so I closed my eyes and felt his tight embrace.

I took a deep breath, inhaling his familiar and calming scent. I suddenly felt like I never wanted to leave his chest.

"Happy birthday to my baby," he whispered, then kissed the top of my head. "I love you."

"I love you," I replied.

Shit… can time just stop right now? Can we just stay like this forever? And what did I even do in my past life to deserve this? Maybe I was a Katipunero who joined the tearing of the cedula in Pugad Lawin.

Or maybe I was a dog—a really good and obedient dog—and that’s why I was rewarded with a handsome, kind, and sweet-smelling number eleven in this life.

"Pack your things, baby," I heard number eleven say, so I looked up at him while still hugging his waist.

"Why?"

"We’re going somewhere."

"Where?"

"It’s a surprise."

"Wait, don’t you have training today?"

He shook his head, so I smiled again. Good thing he wasn’t skipping practice just for this. I understand how important training is since I’m a player too.

He ushered me into the room so I could take a shower and get ready. I told him he could wait for me inside, but he said he’d clean up the confetti scattered in the hallway first.

Of course, I tried to stop him—it felt embarrassing—but he didn’t listen and handed me my towel, telling me to go shower already.

Tsk. Jerome and the others are really going to get it from me. They made the star player of Westmore clean up. It’s not that I’m belittling number eleven’s cleaning skills, but I just can’t imagine him holding a broom and a rag.

I don’t know, but it feels like number eleven has been pampered since he was a baby—like instead of watching Cocomelon, he was already playing volleyball.

I finished showering and only then realized I only brought a towel with me into the bathroom. After securing the towel around my waist, I peeked outside.

And I sighed when I saw number eleven already sitting on my bed. He must’ve finished cleaning. Beside him was the cake, placed on the mini table near my bed.

What, Kai? Are you really going to walk out wrapped only in a towel?

It felt so embarrassing.

But logically, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about since whatever I have, number eleven has too… but still, walking in front of him with just a towel wrapped around me felt awkward. What if the towel slips?

Yeah, he’s my boyfriend, but I don’t want to show him things he’ll see soon enough anyway…

Soon enough when… what, Kai? Finish that thought.

Nothing! Never mind! My brain is such a pest.

"Number eleven," I called out before my thoughts went anywhere else. I only poked my head out of the door.

He looked up from scrolling on his phone. "Yes, baby?"

"Uh, I forgot to bring my clothes. Can you, uh, grab them for me?"

I pointed to the bed where my light green t-shirt, cargo shorts, and underwear were neatly folded.

Shit, right. I forgot my briefs were there too. Tsk. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, Kai.

Number eleven stood up and grabbed my clothes. Thankfully, he didn’t rummage through them. But still, my heart started pounding louder as he approached me.

I don’t know, but it suddenly felt like the room got smaller.

"Here you go," he said, but his gaze was fixed on me. There was something in his eyes—something intense.

And why was he looking at me like that?

Why did I suddenly feel warm even though I'd just showered?

"T-Thanks," I muttered, avoiding his gaze.

"Baby," he called out.

I was about to close the door. "Why?"

"Do you also want me to dress you since you're injured—"

"Whatever," I said, closing the door.

I heard his loud laugh as I opened the shower again. I felt like I needed to rinse my body once more. Tsk.

"You sure you don't want—"

"No! Just stay there!" I shouted.

"I just want to help since you're injured."

I didn't respond, but number eleven kept laughing. Look at him. If he keeps teasing me like this, who knows if we'll even leave.

I came out of the bathroom after getting dressed. I saw him smirking, but I just gave him a glare.

Then I went straight to my small backpack to pack the things I'd need. He had told me to just bring an extra shirt and shorts. I still didn't know where he was taking me, but I followed his instructions anyway.

I packed my wallet, phone, lip balm because my lips were starting to dry out again, and sunscreen because I was scared of getting skin cancer—it was summer, after all.

I checked myself in the mirror to see if I looked okay. Honestly, it had become a habit of mine because I didn't want to look like a mess next to number eleven, who smelled like he was raised on fabric softener.

And while I was doing all that, he just watched me. If this happened before, I might have felt self-conscious. But now, I felt comfortable.

"Why?" I asked because he was so quiet.

He just smiled. "Nothing."

"Are you falling for me again, huh?"

I thought he'd laugh at my joke, but I was a bit surprised when his smile widened and he nodded.

"Yeah. Always."

So annoying.

It's not the cake he brought that's going to give me diabetes—it's him.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder and stood up, ready to invite him to just stay in and cuddle all day instead. "Let's go."

"Wait," he said, standing up and walking toward me. I was a bit surprised when he suddenly hugged me. I quickly recovered and hugged him back. "Happy birthday, Kai," he said again.

I smiled. "What? Should we just stay like this? Forget going out?"

"Okay," he replied quickly. Too quick!

"Just kidding! Let's go," I said, pulling away from the hug. "I'm excited too."

He laughed, and we headed downstairs. In the lobby, we found my teammates squeezed onto the couch. I even saw Kiko snoring. I laughed—they must've woken up early to pull off that surprise for me.

I really should treat them. Jerome probably already knew that number eleven and I were going out because they said their goodbyes. I reminded them to eat the cake in the room. Number eleven also thanked my teammates for helping with the surprise earlier.

"Alejo, take care of Kai, okay? His injury is just his knee—don't make it worse!" Vince teased, and they all laughed.

"Kai, when you come back, don't transfer to Westmore, okay? Don't do that!" Paul joked.

I just shook my head while number eleven laughed along with them. They were such clowns.

Number eleven and I headed straight to his car, which was parked behind the dorm. It was still the black one, not the dark blue. He helped me get into the front seat after placing my backpack in the backseat. As soon as I got in, I immediately felt the cold air. This guy was such an aircon baby.

"I forgot to bring a jacket," I said as he got into the driver's seat.

Actually, I wasn't that cold. I was just fishing for compliments because I wanted to borrow his jacket, which was neatly folded in the backseat.

No big deal—I just wanted to wear his hoodie and feel his scent wrapped around me. He always smelled so good.

"I have one here," number eleven replied.

My smile widened when he grabbed the hoodie and handed it to me. Mission accomplished, Kaizen!

The hoodie was huge on me, but I didn't mind. In fact, I liked it better this way—it was more comfortable. And I wasn't wrong; I could smell number eleven all over the hoodie. I could practically bury myself in it. I could even use it as a blanket.

"Baby, do you want coffee?" he asked as we hit the road.

"Are we doing drive-thru?"

"Alright," he smiled. "Music?" He handed me his phone, so I started picking songs.

"Wait, where are we going, by the way?" I asked.

"Zambales."

I turned to look at him, shocked. "Really?"

He nodded, still smiling. I got even more excited because it would be my first time going there. I quickly searched how long the travel time would be—it was about 5 hours from Manila, depending on traffic.

So I made sure to stay awake during the entire trip because it wouldn't be fair to number eleven if I fell asleep on him. I even had two iced coffees to keep myself wide awake. I sang along to the songs on his playlist that I recognized.

After almost 6 hours of driving, three stopovers, we finally arrived. One of their caretakers greeted us and took our things right away.

I already knew number eleven was a rich kid, but when I saw their vast mango farm, I was completely overwhelmed. And when he took me to the beach, which was just behind their large and beautiful rest house, I was speechless.

When I saw the ocean, I couldn't resist wading in. Wow, I was surrounded by endless sea.

I wanted to jump around, but then I remembered my injury, so I settled for admiring the vast ocean in front of me. We were the only people there, so it was very calming. The wind was strong, so I closed my eyes. Aside from the cool breeze, I could hear the waves crashing.

Wow… so relaxing.

Vitamin sea, indeed.

Can I just stay here forever?

I just stood there until I felt number eleven's arms wrap around me from behind. He rested his head on my shoulder, so I turned to look at him.

"This place is beautiful," I said.

"Hmm… do you like it here?"

"Yes. I want something like this too."

"Should we buy it?"

I laughed and playfully tapped his arm. My wallet suddenly felt so small compared to his wealth.

"Number eleven," I called out.

"Hmm?" His tone was gentle.

Slowly, I turned to face him without breaking his embrace. I placed my hands on his chest. When I looked up, our eyes met immediately.

His eyes were truly beautiful. They could drown you, but you knew he'd save you.

The wind grew stronger.

The waves crashed harder.

But nothing could compare to the pounding of our hearts.

"Thank you," I said, then kissed him on the lips.

I felt him smile and quickly deepen the kiss. This was definitely one of the most unforgettable birthdays I’d ever had.

48

I lost track of how many minutes had passed while number eleven and I just stood there, gazing at the tranquil sea. Neither of us spoke, but it felt so peaceful.

This was exactly what I loved—quiet and relaxing moments like these. Could we just stay here forever? It must feel amazing to wake up to a view of the blue sea and distant mountains, with the first sounds you hear being the wind and the waves. And then, sipping on a warm cup of coffee. It's as if all your problems disappear, and your mind feels completely clear.

Already, I felt sorry for my hometown. Baguio is beautiful, but the sea is truly in a league of its own.

I want to build a house near a place like this someday. How much would that cost? Even a small one would do—it doesn't have to be as big and fancy as number eleven's rest house. I just want a place I can escape to when I'm stressed.

"Baby," number eleven called out.

I turned to look at him. I caught him stopping his playful fiddling with my fingers and reaching into the pocket of his shorts.

"What is it?"

"I have a gift for you."

"Gift?" I got excited.

Number eleven had a gift for me! I felt like a child, overly thrilled as I waited for him to pull it out. My lips parted in awe when he revealed a square, dark blue box. Our eyes met, and his smile grew wide as he handed it to me.

Number eleven opened the box, and my heart started pounding loudly when I saw what was inside.

A gold necklace with a volleyball pendant.

"Happy birthday, Kai," he greeted me again—I'd lost count of how many times he'd said it by now.

"Wow…" I whispered, staring intently at the necklace.

"Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful!" I exclaimed, and he laughed. "Is… is this really for me?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes, baby. It's yours," he said, kissing my forehead. "Let me put it on you."

He moved behind me, and within seconds, I felt the cool metal of the necklace against my skin. When I turned back to face him, I couldn't stop smiling, and my eyes kept returning to the gift he had given me.

Shit… it was truly stunning.

And it was so thoughtful of him to choose a volleyball as the pendant—a reminder of how we first met.

Now I felt even more pressured about what to give him for his birthday. A trip to Thailand suddenly didn't seem enough, did it? Should I get him a necklace too? Or maybe a bracelet? This gift of his seemed expensive. Just thinking about it made my savings account tremble.

"Looks good on you," number eleven said.

"Thank you," I replied, hugging him tightly.

He hugged me back immediately. "You're always welcome, baby."

Man… sometimes, I really can't predict what this guy will do next. He loves surprises. I don't know if he's fully aware of it or if he was just born this way—or if he's doing it on purpose—but who am I to complain, right? It's not like I'm not overjoyed by all the antics of this big baby.

At the same time, I'm incredibly grateful that number eleven came into my life. Even if he didn't give me gifts or surprises, it wouldn't matter. As people say, just having him is enough. For me, though, he's more than enough.

That's why sometimes, I can't help but wonder if it's really true—that he's my boyfriend. Am I just imagining that I can hug and kiss him whenever I want? Even now, after all this time, I still can't believe that he's standing in front of me, smiling and looking at me with those dreamy eyes.

Because… you know? There's no reason, really. I'm just incredibly lucky to have number eleven.

And I hope that I mean just as much to him.

That I reciprocate everything he gives, shows, and makes me feel.

Because he deserves it.

"Number eleven," I called out to him as I pulled out my phone.

"Hmm?"

"Let's take a picture."

We turned our backs to the sea so it would be our background. Number eleven wrapped his arm around me, and we took a few selfies. But it wasn't fair—no matter the angle, this guy always looked perfect. That's what happens when someone is both handsome and photogenic.

I got even more excited thinking about his graduation picture.

That's where it'll really show, right? I've already been practicing the perfect smile for it. Of course, I'm manifesting that I'll graduate too. But honestly, I feel like this guy is guaranteed to graduate on time—and he'll still look handsome in his grad pic.

"Send that to me," he said, pointing to one of the photos where I was looking at the camera, but his gaze was fixed on me. I was smiling brightly, and he looked completely smitten.

Well, that's just me, number eleven.

We stayed there for a few more minutes until he invited me to have a late lunch. At first, I thought we'd just order something, but he brought me to a hut in the middle of their mango farm. To my surprise, a full spread of food was already waiting for us there.

Emphasis on the word *spread*!

I could only gape as we entered the hut. Was this our last lunch together? But then I realized that number eleven must have been starving after driving for six hours.

"Please eat while the food is still hot, sir," said the caretaker, Kuya Aldo, who had greeted us earlier. He placed a pitcher of cold water on the table.

"Thank you, Kuya Aldo," number eleven said. "Thank you," I echoed.

"Just eat, okay? Call me if you need anything else," Kuya Aldo said with a smile before leaving us alone.

I took a deep breath as I looked at the food. It was all Filipino dishes, with fruits on the side. And of course, since we were in a mango farm, the mangoes were my immediate target.

But I was still worried about how we'd finish all of this. I glanced at number eleven and caught him already looking at me. He was smiling as if thoroughly entertained by watching me.

"There's so much food," I said to him.

"Yeah. I think Kuya Aldo got too excited cooking," he replied, laughing. "Let's eat?"

"How are we going to finish all of this?"

Number eleven laughed even harder but didn't answer. Instead, he started serving rice onto my plate and adding various dishes. He wiped the spoon and fork with a tissue before handing them to me. Then he poured water and juice into our glasses.

We began eating shortly after. I couldn't focus much, though, because I was still in awe of their vast mango farm. I learned from number eleven that this farm would eventually be named after him once he graduates. Wow. His future was already secured, just like that.

If only everyone had generational wealth, right?

Imagine not having to worry about building your future because you already know you're safe and won't struggle. I'm not saying it's bad—it's just that people like number eleven are incredibly lucky to have the privileges they do.

Maybe they were really kind in their past lives, which is why they're wealthy now.

"Number eleven," I called out as I watched him peel shrimp for me. Earlier, I had said I'd do it myself, but he insisted that it was my birthday, so I shouldn't have to peel shrimp. I let him do it even though I didn't fully understand the logic behind it.

"Hmm?"

"What are your plans after college?"

He glanced at me briefly but quickly refocused on the shrimp.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, after college, do you plan to go pro in volleyball? For sure, a lot of teams will want you."

"I… actually don't know yet."

"Huh? Why don’t you know yet?"

Number eleven didn’t answer right away. Instead, he fed me a piece of shrimp he had peeled.

"I love volleyball, but I don’t think that’s what I want to do after I get my degree. But I’m not closing any doors," he said with a shrug.

I couldn’t respond immediately. Wow… he was actually thinking about this. I always thought "volleyball is life" was number eleven’s motto because he’s so good at it. I always tell him how easy volleyball seems for him.

I never imagined hearing him say he might not pursue a volleyball career. Honestly, I can’t picture Roen Alejo not being part of the men’s volleyball scene in the Philippines.

He’s one of the future stars—I can even see him as the captain of the national team. Actually, I hoped we could be teammates if I ever got invited to the national team too. I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt a bit sad.

"Baby," he called out, so I looked at him. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," I replied. "I was just thinking I won’t see you in a jersey anymore."

He laughed and fed me another shrimp. "It’s not final yet, and I still have plenty of time to decide."

"True. But whatever decision you make, I’ll support you."

He smiled. "Thank you, baby."

"But if you’re not going to play volleyball anymore, what will you do? Will you manage this farm? Or will you work as an engineer?"

"I want to be your husband," he teased with a wink.

Seriously, this guy. The conversation was so serious, and then he suddenly says something so kilig-inducing?

Husband, huh? He’s really thinking ahead. If I were to say "I do" here, who knows what would happen.

"That’s nice," I said, though I could feel my face turning red. I jokingly hit his arm, but what else could I do? He just laughed at me. "Anyway, what about it? The farm or engineering?"

"I think I can be an engineer while managing the farm."

"Confident!" I said, and he laughed. He used that moment to feed me some squid this time. "But knowing you, I know you can pull it off."

"What makes you think that? What if I fail?"

"You managed to catch up even when the opponent was leading by 10 points. So I know you can handle it."

I noticed his ears turning red, so now it was my turn to laugh. I teased him, but he just avoided my gaze. It’s really cute when I see number eleven getting flustered over me. Of course, it’s not fair if only I’m the one feeling kilig—so it’s nice when he feels it too.

We rested for a bit after eating, and then he invited me to harvest mangoes. Kuya Aldo joined us, and apparently, our timing was perfect since many mangoes were already ripe because it was summer.

I even felt a bit embarrassed because they gave me a whole basket full of ripe mangoes when they found out from number eleven that it was my birthday.

I wanted to pay for them since there were so many, but of course, number eleven wouldn't allow it. So, I decided to share them with the entire team since I couldn't possibly finish them all by myself. I knew coach also loved mangoes, after all.

"It's so sweet!" I exclaimed when they let me taste one of the freshly picked mangoes.

Number eleven smiled and took a bite of the mango I was holding.

"How did it get so sweet? Is it because of the newspaper wrapped around it?"

Number eleven just laughed and explained to me what they do on their farm. As I listened to him, I couldn't help but be amazed because the way he explained things made it clear that he truly knew what he was talking about.

Wow. He really does have a future in farming.

No wonder he's having second thoughts about continuing with volleyball.

But I hope he continues. I want to see him play.

I also want to play alongside him on the same side of the court. Imagine, I'd be the one receiving the ball that he spikes. And we'd both have the Philippine flag on our jerseys?

Oh, wait. If we're on the same team, who gets to wear jersey number eleven?

I guess I'd just give it to him. I'm fine with any number.

But that's only if I get invited to the national team too. There are a lot of talented liberos these days. But if I get the chance, I wouldn't turn down the opportunity to represent the country.

By around 4 PM, we decided to head back because the drive to Manila was still long. Number eleven originally planned to show me around the entire farm and their rest house, but then he remembered that I was injured and my knee couldn't handle too much walking yet.

We said goodbye to Kuya Aldo, and not long after, we were already on the road heading home.

If it were up to me, I would've told him we should stay another day. He hadn't rested yet, and now he'd be driving another six hours. But he had training at 9 AM the next day, so I started thinking of ways to keep myself awake so I could keep him company during the trip.

"Did you have fun?" he asked when the traffic light turned red.

"Yes. Thank you," I replied with a smile. "Thank you for the gift, and thank you for the mangoes. There were so many."

Number eleven laughed as he took my hand. I watched him bring it to his lips and gently kiss it. "You're welcome, baby."

The long drive back went smoothly. There wasn't much traffic on the way back to Manila. Number eleven and I talked about random things, sometimes even singing along to songs on the radio. We'd laugh whenever one of us sang off-key.

Everything was fine until I checked my phone and saw missed calls from Mom and Dad.

I furrowed my brow.

Why did they call?

My question was answered immediately when I opened the messages from Jerome, Reena, and Carlos. They sent me a link, and when I clicked on it, my heart started pounding loudly.

It was a post on Instagram—stolen pictures of me and number eleven kissing.

49

Perhaps because we spend so much time together, number eleven could immediately tell if I was deep in thought. Or maybe I was just too obvious, suddenly going quiet and spacing out.

And it seemed like number eleven got worried about the news I shared with him, so we had to stop at a gas station to… calm down?

But it's not like we were panicking…

It was more shock than anything else. Well, who wouldn't be surprised, right? Private moments of ours were spreading on social media—pictures taken without our consent.

It felt like I had just said how smooth the day was going, and then this happens? If I hadn't checked my phone, I wouldn't have even known that people were already gossiping about me and number eleven.

And it happened on my actual birthday, no less.

They didn't even let the day end properly.

"Water?" number eleven said as he returned from the convenience store.

I smiled at him and took the bottled water. "Thank you."

I drank some, even though I wasn't really thirsty. I was still sitting in the passenger seat, but the door was open. Number eleven stood outside, watching me… or maybe gauging my facial expression.

"Feeling better?" he asked after a few minutes of silence.

I smiled at him and nodded.

I was smiling because I wanted to show him that I was okay. I mean, I really was okay. I was just surprised by the spread of those pictures, but overall, that wasn't what was on my mind right now.

As I've said before, I wasn't hiding my relationship with number eleven. I just wanted us to remain private as much as possible while keeping things low-key. If someone asked, I'd tell them we're together. If no one asked or if they were too shy to ask, then what you see is what you get.

We weren't going to flaunt that we're boyfriends because we don't owe anyone an explanation. They're not part of my relationship with number eleven. But if they were curious, I'd answer honestly.

What I didn't expect was for everyone to find out about us this way.

What I was really thinking about now was number eleven.

I don't know why, but I had a strong feeling this would have a big impact on him. He's famous, after all. Many people admire him—not just because of his volleyball skills but also for his presence outside the sports world.

Even if he doesn't admit it or pay attention to it, everyone knows he has a following and influence.

And I was scared that many people would judge him. That many wouldn't understand. That many still aren't open-minded when it comes to same-sex relationships. And that this might cost him opportunities he truly deserves.

Let’s face it—there are still many homophobic and judgmental people in the Philippines. And that’s another thing I was thinking about aside from number eleven.

My parents… despite the missed calls, I was still hoping they’d be open-minded and understand me… us.

"Baby…" number eleven called out to me again.

I looked up at him and clearly saw the worry on his face. Oh no, maybe he thought I was forcing a smile just to keep him from worrying.

I smiled again and reached for his hand.

"I’m really okay, don’t worry," I said, even laughing a little, but it seemed like it didn’t convince him. "Promise. I’m fine. I was just surprised… and violated?"

I immediately saw the tension in him. "Violated?"

Shit, I think I used the wrong word!

"I mean, that was a private moment, right? Someone took pictures of us without our knowledge, so they violated our rights. Both mine and yours. Yeah, that’s it! Rights! I wasn’t the one violated—it was our rights."

But he still didn’t look reassured. He stared off into the distance, his brow furrowed, deep in thought. I started regretting using the word “violated.”

"Baby," I called out to him.

He quickly turned to look at me.

"I’m really okay," I repeated. "What about you? Are you okay?"

I noticed him pause for a moment. "I’m not. I’m actually mad right now at whoever posted our pictures. Why would someone do that?"

I took a deep breath as I looked at him. Yes, I was okay with people knowing about me and number eleven, but I was also annoyed that it happened this way. It wasn’t just that they invaded our privacy—it felt like whoever did this intended to embarrass us. And I couldn’t help but be amazed at the effort they went through to follow us to Tagaytay just to take those pictures. I hope they can sleep tonight after what they’ve done.

"I thought you liked drama? Well, here it is. They’ve made an issue out of us. And it’s not even just TikTok-"

I stopped joking when number eleven raised his eyebrows at me. I awkwardly smiled and scratched my cheek. Shit, for the first time since we got together, I was scared of his serious expression.

My uninjured knee started shaking. This was the face he made when he was ready to spike the ball!

"Sorry," I said softly.

I braced myself for him to scold me, but I was surprised when he suddenly hugged me instead.

"I’m sorry, baby," he said, sighing deeply. "I’m just mad that something like this happened on your birthday."

"Yeah, me too," I replied, burying my face into his chest. "There’s always next year."

He breathed deeply again, and I felt him kiss the top of my head.

"I'm worried about you," he said.

I should be the one worrying about you.

I looked up at him. "This will pass. People will forget about it. Smile already."

"I don't want to."

"Come on. Smile. It's my birthday, after all."

As soon as I said that, he gave me his signature smile—the one where his teeth don't show. I just laughed and shook my head. He was forcing the smile, but I let it slide.

We probably stayed at the gas station for a few more minutes until I realized he needed to get back because he had an early training session the next day. After two hours, we finally arrived at Creston's dorm. When I checked my watch, there were still 15 minutes before curfew.

Number eleven helped me out of the car. He even carried the basket of mangoes inside for me. He didn't want to leave, and even though I wanted him to stay—even if it was just in the lobby—I sent him off because he really needed to rest.

"I'll message you once I get back to the dorm," he said, kissing my forehead. "And call me if you need anything or if something happens, okay?"

I nodded. "Okay. Take care. Thank you for today."

"You're always welcome," he smiled. "Are you sure you're okay, baby?"

"Sure na sure," I smiled back. "What about you?"

"I'm okay when you're okay."

We stared at each other for a moment. The dry April wind blew around us. If he didn't have training tomorrow, I would've asked him to stay over.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you," he replied, hugging me tightly one last time before leaving.

The room was empty when I entered. Jerome and the others were probably still at training. I tossed my backpack somewhere and sat down, spacing out. Tsk. At the end of the day, no matter how many times I told myself I was okay, I couldn't stop thinking about those pictures. Who could've taken them? Was it the same person who uploaded them? We checked the uploader's profile earlier, but it was empty. It seemed like the account was made just for that purpose. Why did they do it? Did we do something to upset them? Do they have a grudge against us? Against me?

I was deep in thought when the door suddenly opened, and Jerome, Vince, Kiko, Paul, and Drew barged in. The worry on their faces replaced the initial shock of seeing me, so I smiled to show them there was nothing to worry about.

"Kai! We already reported that post!" Kiko exclaimed.

“Are you okay, Kai?” Drew asked.

“That uploader is such an idiot! So nosy! Probably their first time seeing people kiss! They must be jealous,” Vince added.

“Don’t open your social media for now, Kai. You’ll just get upset,” Paul advised.

“What did Alejo say?” Jerome asked.

“Thank you, guys,” I started, and that’s when our long conversation began. It was funny because they seemed more affected than I was. I felt a bit embarrassed because I kept repeating that I was fine.

And if I hadn’t yawned, Jerome wouldn’t have suggested we go to sleep. Kiko, Paul, and Drew even wanted to crash in our room, but the captain didn’t allow it.

Still, these were the nights when I’d feel sleepy but couldn’t fall asleep. It’s hard when you’re born an overthinker. Even if you try not to think about it, your mind won’t stop.

And it’s not just idle thinking—your brain starts creating scenarios. And not all of those scenarios are good. Most of the time, they make you overthink even more.

‘Dorm,’ number eleven messaged.

‘Okay. Rest already.’

‘Are you really okay, baby?’

I turned to my side while replying to him.

‘I’m okay. Don’t think about it too much. You have training and games. Focus on that, or you might lose.’

Thankfully, number eleven didn’t argue further.

After we finished talking, I messaged Reena and Carlos next. I just thanked them. Then I noticed the missed calls from my parents.

Should I message them? They haven’t called back since my birthday. But I decided to just let it go for now.

Two days passed, and almost nothing changed in my routine. Maybe it was because I followed the advice of the coaching staff and my teammates to avoid social media so I wouldn’t get distracted from my rehab.

So far, it was working. I had no idea if the pictures were still trending or if people had moved on. Or maybe our story was still all over social media, but the people around me weren’t telling me to spare me from overthinking. Honestly, that was fine with me because I was tired of overthinking.

I also checked on number eleven to see how he was doing, especially during their training sessions. I had no idea what was going on with his team because I didn’t ask. I felt that if I joked with number eleven about their strategies, someone might actually tell me. Plus, I didn’t know all of his teammates—I only saw them during games. How was I supposed to know if there were homophobic people on his team?

But his response to me was simple: he said he was fine too. He told me to focus on my recovery, and that’s exactly what I did.

So, the only problem left was my parents… who hadn’t called me since my birthday. I messaged them, but they still didn’t reply.

It made me anxious.
“Are you coming to the arena, Kai?” Jerome asked the next day.

I nodded and joined them on the bus heading to the arena. It was game day. Both Creston and Westmore had matches, so I decided to watch live to support my team and number eleven.

To be honest, I was hesitant about going. But… I don’t know. I suddenly thought this morning that I wanted to prove to people that I wasn’t hiding from this issue.

That the issue didn’t bother me because what was in those pictures was real—we were kissing. So what?

I realized it wasn’t my problem anymore what others thought or judged.

What mattered most was number eleven.

“Nice one, team!” I shouted as Creston won in three sets.

Honestly, I was overly conscious of the stares people were giving me, but I tried to ignore them. It was annoying sometimes when I caught them whispering and pointing at me, but I didn’t react. Things got worse when Westmore came out for their official warm-up. People started shouting when cameras focused on me and number eleven. I avoided looking and was grateful when Jerome stayed with me, saying they’d keep me company during the next game. They also took care of the stares directed at me.

Not long after, number eleven’s game began. It ended quickly, and they won in three sets too. He was named Player of the Game, so he was interviewed by the courtside reporter.

My heart was pounding as I heard the next question:

“So, Roen, everybody’s asking—is it true that you’re dating Kaizen Reyes from Creston University?”

The crowd erupted. People hadn’t even left their seats despite the game being over. It was as if they expected this question the moment they found out number eleven was being interviewed.

I straightened up, staring intently at number eleven’s face on the screen above.

And I could feel my heart in my throat when he looked directly into the camera and nodded.

“Yes, we’re dating. He’s actually here right now,” he answered seriously. “Hi, baby.”

I almost went deaf from the roar of the crowd.

50

I could hear the crowd's cheers loud and clear after number eleven's announcement that we were dating. I saw some people pushing and shoving on the other side of the arena. My mischievous teammates were going wild beside me, like overexcited puppies wagging their tails.

"Damn, I swear I only get kilig from other people's love lives!" Kiko exclaimed before shouting again.

"Wow, Alejo! Idol! Teach us those moves, senpai!" Paul added, bowing dramatically as a joke.

"Alejo's really something! MVP on the court, and MVP in Kai's heart too!" Of course, Vince wasn't going to let that slide.

Jerome and Drew just burst into laughter.

As for me, I didn't know what to do. I adjusted my sitting position several times, but for some reason, I couldn't find a comfortable spot. All I knew was that my chest was pounding loudly, and my whole face felt hot. I knew the camera was focused on me, but I avoided looking at the screen above.

I pretended it didn't bother me, but deep down, I wanted to hide behind Jerome.

But why would I do that, right?

Number eleven proudly announced that we were dating. He even greeted me on national TV. So why should I feel embarrassed?

I smiled. And the crowd erupted again.

It seemed like "Kai and Roen" were trending on social media again. I guess I needed to prepare myself for TikTok edits of me and number eleven.

His dream of having a video with romantic background music might actually come true.

But seriously, I don't know… when I saw other people smiling and cheering happily after number eleven's announcement, it warmed my heart.

I wasn't sure if their smiles and cheers were because they supported or accepted us as a couple, but it was nice to see such reactions. It made me realize there were people outside his teammates, coaches, a few friends, and family who were open-minded about things like this.

If you had asked before, many would've been angry or judgmental because same-sex relationships are still sensitive topics. It was heartwarming to see that things were somehow different now.

"Thank you, guys," I said to Jerome as they escorted me to the parking lot after we managed to escape the people asking for pictures with me.

Honestly, I didn't expect that. I didn't think people would approach me for photos! Some suddenly shoved their faces close to mine. Others pulled my shirt. Some even handed me their phones to take better shots.

I didn't know if I was smiling properly—or if I was even smiling at all. Maybe I even looked like I was grimacing. Thankfully, Jerome and the others were there to tell people not to be too aggressive since I was still injured.

I didn’t know what I would’ve done if I were alone earlier. Maybe I’d have charged 20 pesos per photo. I even caught a glimpse of number eleven during the chaos. He wanted to approach, but there were just too many people. Eventually, one of his teammates pulled him away.

Thankfully, we had already agreed to meet at the parking lot after the game.

"You’re already trending, Kai," Drew said, looking at his phone.

"Yeah! People are so fast. There’s already a video of you and your boyfriend, Kai. Look," Vince said, showing me his phone.

And there it was—exactly what I expected. Uploaded instantly with *Enchanted* by Taylor Swift as the background music! I was stunned when someone even uploaded baby pictures of me and number eleven! Even from our high school days when I looked so scruffy! Shit, where did they get those? Didn’t I set some of my albums to private?

"I was enchanted to meet you…" Kiko sang, and I immediately scowled.

"Please, don’t be in love with someone else…" Paul joined in, ignoring my glare.

"Please, don’t have somebody waiting on you…" And the trio wouldn’t be complete without Vince chiming in. These fools.

"What, are you two going to sing too?" I asked Jerome and Drew, who just laughed. "Promise me this, Kai," Jerome said, gripping my shoulders.

"No matter how good Alejo is at being romantic, you’re not transferring to Westmore, okay? Creston forever, right?"

I jokingly punched his chest.

The clowns left after they were satisfied teasing me. As soon as they were gone, I hid behind number eleven’s car. I don’t know—I was traumatized by the picture-taking frenzy earlier.

Not long after, I spotted number eleven approaching. Freshly showered, he had changed into a white shirt, dark blue jersey shorts, and Nike slides. His duffel bag was slung over his left shoulder.

Our eyes met, and I almost laughed at his expression. You know that look puppies give when they’ve been scolded? That was him right now.

What was wrong with him? Earlier, he was so confident and cool when he announced our relationship. But now, guilt and fear were written all over his face. Plus, he was walking so slowly, like he was dragging his feet through Burnham Park.

"Hey, what’s with that look?" I asked when he finally reached me. I was starting to worry because he kept avoiding my gaze and pouting. "Why do you look like that? Congratulations on your win, by the way."

He finally looked at me. "I’m guilty."

My brow furrowed. "About what?"

"About what happened earlier."

"Earlier? What about earlier?" He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he stepped closer and hugged me tightly.

"I’m sorry, baby," he whispered.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"I told them we’re dating without asking you first."

I didn’t react immediately but hugged him back anyway.

Oh… so that’s why he looked like a scolded puppy.

"I know I always say we’ll take things slow, but…" I heard him take a deep breath, and he hugged me even tighter. "I’m really sorry, baby."

"What are you talking about…" I said softly, patting his back. "It’s fine. I thought something worse happened."

He pulled away from the hug and stared at me, lips slightly parted. "You’re not mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

He blinked at me in surprise. Look at him. How does someone so big manage to be as cute as a keychain sometimes? He’s so lovable—like someone you’d want to bring home, serve, and take care of.

I smiled. "I’d only be mad if you said we weren’t dating."

"I’ll never say that," he said firmly.

"I know. Besides, our pictures have already spread everywhere. It would’ve been ugly to deny it. They just needed confirmation. You only answered their question honestly. If they asked me, I’d have said the same thing. I’d wave at the camera too," I laughed.

"So… thank you."

As I said that, I noticed the softness in number eleven’s eyes. Wow… his eyes are truly beautiful—deep and brown, like you could drown in them. I was falling even harder.

"You’re not really mad, baby?"

"Not at all."

"Really?"

"If you ask me one more time, I might actually get mad."

"Alright," he said with a smile, looking like a thorn had finally been pulled from his chest. "I want to kiss you."

"Go ahead."

"But there might be a camera—"

I laughed and pulled him by the shirt to kiss him on the lips. I could feel number eleven’s surprise, but it probably lasted less than three seconds. He looked so flustered now, didn’t he?

We went to a restaurant near Creston. It was a short date since he needed to return to Westmore right away because they had training again tonight. And as expected, many eyes were on us. Though I felt a bit self-conscious, I tried my best to ignore them. I mimicked number eleven, who was used to being stared at—either he was completely unfazed, or he just didn't care.

Afterward, we went to a coffee shop. Again, many people stared, and a few even took pictures. As usual, I ordered iced coffee, and he got a matcha latte.

Finally, he dropped me off at the dorm.

"Be careful driving," I said as I got out of the car.

"Can I call you later before you sleep?"

"Okay," I replied with a smile. Number eleven hugged me tightly. "I love you, baby," he whispered, kissing my forehead before getting back into his car and driving off.

I watched his car disappear into the distance before heading into the dorm. But maybe it was the effect of the coffee—my heart was pounding loudly when I saw Mama sitting on the sofa in the lobby. Aunt Melba, who first saw me here, was with her too.

"Kai," Aunt Melba said, and Mama turned to look at me.

Our eyes met immediately. Her expression was serious, and I couldn't help but feel nervous. She hadn't replied to my messages for days, but I wasn't surprised to see her here today. Either I would have gone to Baguio to talk to her, or she would come down to Manila.

I took a deep breath and slowly approached them. First, I greeted Aunt Melba respectfully, then Mama, before sitting on the single sofa opposite them. I noticed Mama's phone on the table and realized she was on a video call with Papa, who was also staring at me seriously.

"Pa," I said, and he nodded.

After that, no one spoke.

I sat there, letting the silence linger. Mama and Papa were probably still figuring out what to say and how to start asking me questions.

"Kai, how's your knee?" Aunt Melba finally broke the silence.

"I can walk and jump a little now," I replied.

She nodded and gave me a small smile.

Then silence again. I glanced at Mama and Papa, who remained quiet. I let out a sigh. Tsk. Why was I waiting for them to speak? I was the one who needed to say something to them.

You can do this, Kai.

I couldn't avoid telling them. They already knew anyway. All they needed was to hear it directly from me.

"Ma, Pa," I began, and they immediately looked at me. "I'm bisexual."

I saw Mama take a deep breath while Papa continued to stare at me intently. I sighed too—not because I was disappointed or upset by their reaction, but because, finally, I had said it.

It… felt so good.
"And I have a boyfriend now," I added.

"Is it… Roen?" Mama asked.

"Yes."

"When he was in Baguio…" Mama hesitated. "Were you two already together then?"

"No. We got together after I got injured."

"Is he the one you were with in Tagaytay? The one in the pictures spreading online now?" Papa asked, his voice calm but firm.

I nodded.

Silence again.

The only thing I could hear was the loud beating of my heart. I didn't know if it was because Mama and Papa were so calm right now. I had expected them to yell at me or scold me. But… they were just asking questions.

Should I be more nervous?

"Kai, my child," Mama called out, so I looked at her. "Are you sure… this isn't just a fleeting emotion? Yours and Roen's? You're both still so young—"

"No, Ma," I interrupted her. "I'm sure about how I feel. I'm sure about… who I am."

Silence again.

"Why are you only telling us now, Kai? If we hadn't come here, would you have told us?" Mama asked, tears welling up in her eyes, her voice tinged with hurt.

Shit. I felt weak in that moment. One of the things I hated most was seeing her cry. I'd never seen Mama cry outside of the dramas she and Aunt Melba watched, but knowing I was the reason she was crying now—it hurt so much.

"I'm sorry," I said, moving closer to her. I started crying too. "I was going to tell you after the season ended. I've been rehabbing—"

"Have there been times, my child, when you felt like you couldn't tell me about this?"

"Ma, no—"

I froze when Mama started crying uncontrollably. Even Aunt Melba beside her was crying now. I quickly hugged her, tears streaming down my face too.

"Sorry, Kai, my child…"

"Ma, why are you apologizing…"

"I’m sorry if you thought we’d be angry, you and your father. No, my child. I’m not angry, and I’m not disappointed in you. Remember, we, as your parents, will always be the first to accept you. Always remember that, okay?"

I just nodded, still crying.
"All we want is for you to tell us. To share your stories. If you have problems… if you’re going through something… you don’t need to hide it, Kai. You know we’re here for you. We’ll always support you."

"Kai," Papa said, so I turned to look at him. I cried even harder when I saw that he was crying too as he watched us. "My child, thank you for telling us. Your mother and I love you. That will never change."

"We love you, Kai!" Aunt Melba said, hugging both me and Mama.

I cried even more.

I didn’t care anymore if I looked like a 7-year-old Kaizen being comforted by Mama.

Wow… I didn’t expect them to say those words to me. Honestly, I had prepared myself for the worst possible outcome. But hearing those words from them… it made me feel so light.

The heavy weight I hadn’t even realized was on my shoulders these past few days suddenly disappeared.

I was so happy. I couldn’t describe how happy I was right now. And I was so grateful—I was so lucky to have parents like mine. I still couldn’t believe it… they accepted me.

They truly accepted me.

"Thank you," I said to them, and I couldn’t stop crying.

Epilogue 1

I don’t know how many minutes we spent crying there with Mama. How could I stop myself when every time I thought about how they accepted me for who I am, my tears just kept flowing? Maybe I was being overly dramatic, but I couldn’t help it—I just couldn’t believe it.

I also don’t know what I did in my past life to deserve parents like mine. Actually, that’s when I realized just how lucky I am—not just with my parents, but with almost everyone around me. From my coaches and teammates who are incredibly supportive… to my friends… and now, my family.

And of course, number eleven isn’t far behind either.

So, I’m incredibly thankful to be surrounded by people who are open-minded and don’t judge me. And I hope that one day, everyone who comes out and embraces who they are will also receive the same love and support from the people they care about.

Because that’s one of the most beautiful feelings in the world.

No one deserves to be judged for who they are or for who they choose to love.

"Baby, did something happen?" number eleven asked as soon as we started our video call that night.

Mama and Aunt Melba had left after comforting me. Their original plan was to head back to Baguio right after talking to me, but I didn’t let them. Even though I was still sniffling earlier, I convinced them to stay at a hotel so they could rest from the trip and so I’d have more time to spend with them tomorrow. My plan was to have lunch together before they headed home in the afternoon.

I looked at number eleven. He was already lying on his bed in their dorm while I was still sitting on the couch in the lobby. Thankfully, he was wearing a sleeveless shirt and not shirtless because I was freezing in his room—even though I hadn’t been there yet.

"Hm?" I replied.

"Your eyes are red," he said, concern starting to spread across his face. "Why did you cry?"

"Are they still red? I washed my face earlier."

"Do you want me to come over? Give me 15 minutes. Wait for me, okay?"

He was about to stand up, but I stopped him. "Oh, it’s okay. Don’t come here. It’s late already."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded and smiled. "Yep."

"But why did you cry? What happened?"

"Well, uh… Mama and Aunt Melba came by earlier. We talked, and then… we cried a little."

A little, Kai? Your nose was running like crazy earlier.

I saw number eleven freeze. "What?"

"I told them… about us."

We stared at each other. I smiled again and looked up to stop the tears that were threatening to fall once more. Wow… every time I remembered what Mama and Papa said earlier, I automatically started crying. What child wouldn't cry after hearing those words from their parents, right?

Maybe for others—or even for some parents—it might not seem like a big deal… but their words of support and acceptance meant so much. Not all parents are like that. Not everyone who comes out has a happy story. That's why I feel so lucky to have parents who immediately accepted me for who I am.

"Baby, are you okay?" number eleven asked, and judging by his expression, he seemed to think something bad had happened between me and Mama. "I'll come over. Right now. Wait for me—"

"Oh no, don't," I interrupted. "I'm really okay. We didn't fight, Mama and I. Actually, they support us," I said with a big smile. "Us."

Number eleven slowly calmed down and stared at me. He probably checked if I wasn't just pretending or anything. He bit his lower lip, and I clearly saw his ears turning red. And we both know that when his ears turn red, it's either because he's embarrassed or he's feeling kilig.

Wow… number eleven is feeling kilig at the thought that my parents accepted us… was he nervous? Was he scared that we wouldn't be accepted? Did he think about what our next steps would be if my family didn't support us, just like I did?

I couldn't help but laugh. Now both of us were feeling kilig.

"Really?" he asked, trying to play it cool, licking his lower lip again and smiling.

"Yeah," I answered, laughing even more. "Are you feeling kilig?"

"Who wouldn't?"

That's what I love about number eleven—he always tells me exactly how he feels, especially when I confirm it with him. I took a deep breath as we continued to stare at each other. We were like two idiots, smiling at each other through the screen. It would've been more romantic in person because this video call felt like a long-distance relationship (LDR), even though we're only separated by a jeep ride right now.

But nothing could ruin my night. We were approved by number eleven's family. We were approved by my family too. That's what mattered most.

"Mama said she wants to take me to Baguio after the season," I said.

"After the season? I don't think so, baby."

I furrowed my brow. "Why not?"

"I'll be meeting your mom and aunt tomorrow."

"Huh? Tomorrow?"

"Aunt already agreed," he said, showing me the text conversation on his phone through the iPad he uses for our video calls… but wait, was I reading that right?

"You texted Mama?" I straightened up.

Wait, how did he manage to text Mama while staring at me? I didn't even notice! And honestly, I forgot that he even had my mom's number, but I never expected him to message her to arrange a meeting.

Number eleven smirked proudly at me. "I want to formally introduce myself, baby. So, see you tomorrow?"

And that's exactly what happened the next day. After my rehab session and number eleven's training in the morning, he picked me up from the dorm around 11 AM. Lunchtime was the plan he and Mama had discussed, and we were going to pick them up from the hotel. I asked number eleven where we were going to eat, and I found out he had already made a reservation at a steakhouse.

To be honest, my wallet was getting nervous. Sometimes, being with number eleven can really be stressful. But spending on an expensive steakhouse now felt okay compared to his original plan of going to Singapore.

I couldn't handle that. Seriously. He just wanted to introduce himself as my boyfriend, but he wanted to do it in another country? It almost became Japan, too! If we had our passports and visas ready, we might have ended up in the Land of the Rising Sun already.

It made me suddenly remember the time I jokingly said I wanted to go to Thailand, and he immediately asked if I had my passport with me and if he should book a flight already.

The response? Rich kid problems.

"Number eleven," I called out to him.

He only glanced at me briefly since he was driving. Actually, I'd been stealing glances at him since earlier. Aside from how handsome he looked today in his dark blue polo shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and his hair styled to expose his forehead, I couldn't detect even a hint of nervousness. He was so chill—humming even—and you could see the excitement on his face.

I mean, me? I felt like I could pee from anxiety just thinking about facing my parents. But why wasn't he nervous? It wasn't fair.

"I told you, baby, it's my treat," he replied.

I pouted. This was one of the things we'd been debating since earlier. I insisted we split the bill, but of course, when has Roen ever let me win when it comes to treating?

"You can't do anything once I've already bank-transferred the payment," I countered.

"I'll just send it back to you, then."

"We're splitting it. I have money too, you know."

"I know, baby," he said softly, reaching for my left hand and squeezing it gently. "But please, let me."

That was it. Kaizen melted under the sweetness of Roen's voice.

"Number eleven," I called out again.

"Hmm?"

"Aren't you nervous?"

"No," he answered quickly.

"Why not?"

"Because I already know they're going to like me."

I rolled my eyes, and he laughed. Sometimes, his confidence matches his jersey number—signal number eleven-level arrogance when he wants to boast.

"Good afternoon," number eleven greeted Mama and Aunt Melba when we arrived at the hotel.

There was absolutely no trace of nervousness on his face! I wish I could be like that when he introduces me to his parents someday. But honestly, just thinking about it makes me imagine them handing me an envelope with 10 million pesos so I could run away. Of course, that's just a joke. I'll toughen up for number eleven.

"Good afternoon, hijo," Mama greeted back.

Number eleven respectfully took Mama's hand to give her a traditional Filipino greeting (mano), and I followed suit. But when it came to Aunt Melba, she didn't let us do the mano. Instead, she surprised both me and number eleven by pulling us into a tight hug.

"You two look good together," she whispered with a giggle. I laughed while this guy's ears turned red again.

He's feeling kilig again.

Afterward, number eleven took Mama's bags and placed them in the trunk of the car. Meanwhile, I helped Mama and Tita Melba into the backseat. Not long after, we were on our way to the restaurant.

I glanced at Mama from the front seat. She looked calm. Aunt Melba, on the other hand, was smiling brightly. Our driver was super chill too. Shit, why was I the only one feeling nervous? Tsk.

But wow… I never expected this.

Me, number eleven, and Mama and Aunt Melba—all in one car, heading to a restaurant for our formal announcement as a couple? The only one missing was Papa. I don't know—it felt surreal.

Maybe I expected us to face more resistance, like some kind of against-all-odds scenario… or maybe I'm just overthinking again.

We arrived at the restaurant, and there was already a table reserved for us. Number eleven mostly handled ordering the food since he seemed to be a regular customer here. While waiting for the food, we exchanged glances.

I felt the warmth of his palm resting on top of mine. We intertwined our fingers.

Number eleven smiled at me.

I took a deep breath and smiled back.

To be honest, I was nervous. I knew we were supported and accepted by Mama and Aunt Melba, but… I don't know. It's not like we were getting married or anything, but this felt even more nerve-wracking than during a game.

"Titas," number eleven began, addressing Mama and Aunt Melba, who had probably been watching us this whole time. "I want to take this opportunity to formally introduce myself as Kai's boyfriend."

I saw Mama nod with a smile, while Aunt Melba clapped her hands. I gripped number eleven's hand tighter.

Wow… this was what it felt like. So light. So happy. So, so happy.

Epilogue 2

"Let’s go Creston U! Let’s go!"

I joined in with the cheers of our school’s supporters. I waved the balloon I was holding, feeling a mix of nervousness, excitement, and thrill. Then I turned to number eleven beside me, grabbed his hand, and started waving it too. He just smiled and let me do as I pleased.

It’s game day today between Creston and Easton. This game is extremely important for the team because if we lose, Easton will advance to the finals. But if we win, there’ll be a do-or-die match.

A stepladder format happened during this semifinals round. Westmore swept the entire season—they didn’t lose a single game, so they’re already in the finals, waiting to see who wins among ranks 2, 3, and 4.

Easton ranked 2nd and secured the twice-to-beat advantage. We had the same win-loss record, but they beat us on set points. We defeated them in Round 1 in 5 sets, but they crushed us in Round 2 in just 3 sets, which made Creston rank 3rd.

Honestly, I kind of felt bad for the team because they were the ones who were most exhausted going into today’s match. A few days ago, they played a grueling 5-set game against Northville, who ranked 4th, and now they have to face Easton, who has the advantage.

But as my mischievous teammates always say, other schools may fight fiercely, but in the end, Westmore will still be the champion.

Well, they’re right.

But as I always say, the ball is round. Still, at least no matter what happens, the team has already secured a podium finish this season. Last year, we were only 4th place. If we lose today, we’ll get bronze. But if we beat Easton, we’re guaranteed silver, and if by some miracle we defeat Westmore, we might even take home the gold.

I glanced again at number eleven, who was now leaning back in his seat. One of his arms was resting behind my chair.

He must’ve felt me staring because he turned to look at me. He quickly smiled and tapped my nose.

"Yes, baby?" he whispered.

"What does it feel like to be champions again this season?"

He laughed. "It feels great."

I jokingly smacked his thigh, but he just laughed at me. This guy is so arrogant! But then again, it’s true—they really are champions again. This game is just a formality at this point.

"Baby," he whispered again.

"Hm?"

"I love you," he said softly.

"Are you guilty about something?"

"What?" he asked, laughing.

Before I could respond, we heard the crowd around us erupt in cheers, especially those seated near us. Instinctively, I looked up at the screen above, and there we were—me and number eleven.

I felt my face heat up, but this guy beside me didn't even flinch. His nose was still close to my cheek. He truly didn't care if people saw us being affectionate in public.

But deep down, I secretly loved that he was so open about it.

It didn't help that we were dressed alike today—white oversized shirts to support Creston, cargo pants, and white shoes. Number eleven planned this, of course. Earlier, he asked me what I was wearing so he could match with me. He said it would be "matchy-matchy." I just went along with it because I liked the idea too.

The camera probably stopped focusing on us when the players from both schools were called for the official warm-up. I noticed how big his smile was, and I just shook my head.

I'm sure there's another TikTok video of us coming soon. Lately, these videos have been popping up more often. Of course, it's unavoidable to come across some negative comments, especially from people with Bible verses on their profiles, but I've learned to ignore them.

And of course, number eleven is thrilled because he'll have something new to watch before bed. Yep, he says watching TikTok edits of us helps him fall asleep. He even created a TikTok account just for that. Weird, but if it makes him happy, I support it. He's dreamed of this for a long time.

"Turn it off!" I shouted as the game began.

It was already Set 3. Easton had already taken the first two sets, and they were now leading by 3 points. Their game plan was clear: be aggressive on the service line to disrupt Jerome's plays, and it was working because we couldn't receive properly.

Coach was frustrated. Team morale was low. The Creston supporters were almost silent. And as much as I wanted to step onto the court right now to help the team, I couldn't.

And just like that, we lost in straight sets. I felt number eleven put his arm around me. He didn't say anything, but I knew he was trying to comfort me. Still, the team needed it more than I did.

But hey, a bronze medal isn't bad either, right? The team fought hard. Maybe this just wasn't our year to make it to the finals. Plus, I got injured…

Anyway, I know we'll bounce back.

Next year, after I recover, I'll return stronger.

As long as I have playing years left, I'll play and fight for Creston University.

"Kai, who are you betting your twenty pesos on?" Kiko asked when Game 1 of the finals began.

Paul immediately smacked him on the head. "You idiot, obviously Kai's betting on Alejo. Duh!"

"How would I know if Kai's suddenly rooting for Easton? You're the idiot!"

"And why would he root for Easton? Did he and Alejo get into a fight or something?"

"Shut up! Here's my twenty. I'm betting on Westmore," Vince said.

They kept arguing, but I didn't pay much attention. I was getting nervous too. Honestly, I don't know why—I wasn't the one playing—but I was even more nervous than number eleven.

I even texted him earlier. I asked if he was nervous, but all he said was that he already knew last week they'd win.

This guy can be so arrogant sometimes.

But of course, aside from wanting them to win because Westmore is aiming for a 4-peat championship, I hope this finals series is injury-free for both teams. It's enough that I was the last one injured this season because, as an athlete, it's tough—not just physically, but mentally too.

"Here comes Westmore University!"

We joined in the cheers as number eleven and his team were called for the official warm-up. And of course, the camera immediately focused on my boyfriend.

He was already in full game-face mode.

Ready to spike the ball.

I couldn't help but smile when I thought about how different his serious expression is when he's with me. Around me, he's always gentle, with soft eyes.

Moments like this still make me wonder how I ended up dating number eleven. Especially how he fell for me. Just look at him—he's so handsome, especially when he wears my favorite dark blue jersey.

I was just looking at him when he found my eyes. He gave me his signature smile and waved. I laughed when I saw his teammates teasing him and mimicking his wave. They also waved at me, which made me a little embarrassed.

Of course, my companions weren't going to let me off easy either.

"Kai, you're staring at Alejo! You're gonna melt!"

"Send a flying kiss to your baby, Kai! For good luck!"

"Idiot! If Kai sends a flying kiss, it's over! Everyone go home! Alejo's in god mode! The score will be 25-0!"

"Hey, Kai's mad now! He's in keychain mode!"

"Clowns," I muttered, and they burst out laughing.

Until the crowd erupted in cheers again. I looked up at the screen, and honestly, I wasn't surprised to see me and number eleven on it. There was even a split-screen! My companions beside me were practically losing it.

Usually, I'd look away immediately, but this time, I stared straight into the camera. This cameraman clearly has favorites. Number eleven and I are his top picks, so every time I watch a live game, there's guaranteed TikTok content. And while I get annoyed, number eleven is thrilled whenever there's a new video.

So look at him now. Instead of warming up, he's standing there, looking up at the screen and smiling.

So I smiled too.

Who wouldn’t smile at a baby like that?
Alright, number eleven, you’ve made your point.

"Wearing jersey number eleven, Westmore University's outside spiker, Roen Alejo!"

Not long after, the game began. My nervousness returned. I hoped number eleven’s team would win. I hoped no one would get injured, and everyone would stay safe.

The referee blew the whistle for the first serve. Easton was serving, and I don’t know why their setter did a safe serve because you can’t do that against Westmore. It’s not just number eleven who’s good—his teammates are incredible too.

Their libero’s reception was flawless. And their setter kept his hands hidden while setting, so you never knew who he’d pass the ball to.

And the result? A powerful bounce spike courtesy of number eleven, Roen Alejo!

The entire arena thundered again. I clapped my hands because number eleven was still in the air before he hit the ball. Wow… my nervousness felt useless because this guy was playing like a pro.

He even shook his jersey! So arrogant!

"Damn, Alejo’s really flying!" Kiko exclaimed, and when he noticed me looking at him, he quickly made a peace sign. "Oh, sorry, Kai! It’s not Alejo who’s damn—it’s his elevation. Damn that elevation!"

I laughed. "Idiot."

"This is Westmore’s game already. Alejo’s inspired," Jerome added with a laugh.

The game continued, and all I could say was how amazing my baby was. Wow, Kai, you’re really feeling it.

But seriously, everyone knows he’s good, but what he’s doing now is on a professional level. He’s so smart on the court, and his court awareness is insane. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone offers him a chance to play abroad after he graduates.

And I’ll support him if that happens.

I know I’ll give him 100% support if he decides to play overseas.

Yes, he’ll be far away, but I won’t stop him from representing the Philippines on the world stage. Besides, I have a passport. No matter where he plays, I’ll just fly over to watch him live.

That’s why it makes me sad whenever I think he might not pursue a volleyball career after college. We talked about it again, but he said his decision isn’t final yet. He still has a few years to decide.

But as I told him, no matter what decision he makes, I’ll always be by his side to support him. Of course, deep down, I still want him to keep playing volleyball.

Aside from wanting to experience Creston vs. Westmore in the finals at the collegiate level, I also want him to be my teammate if I ever make it to the national team. And at the same time, I’d love to face him at the professional level because there’s something satisfying about blocking his spikes.

Just don’t let him facial-hit me again.

Once was enough—I might need rhinoplasty if it happens a second time.

"Westmore University is now at match point!"

The crowd erupted. Actually, they'd been screaming every point scored by both teams, but the cheers were louder whenever number eleven was the one spiking. He's famous, after all.

The referee blew the whistle. Number eleven was serving. I laughed when he closed his eyes and whispered to the ball. Seriously, as clean as his spikes are, his serves are equally messy.

I don't think he's gotten a single serve in yet! Thankfully, he more than makes up for it with his attacks.

"That's an error," Jerome said, laughing.

"I think so too," I replied while holding the necklace number eleven gave me for my birthday.

But as they say, expect the unexpected.

When he didn't jump for his serve, that's when number eleven delivered an ace!

I couldn't help but stand up and scream. I was so proud—he finally got his serve in!

That's my baby! "Alejo with an ace! Westmore University wins game number 1 of the finals!"

Their whole team celebrated in the middle of the court. Their setter was named Player of the Game, and rightfully so because he really activated all their spikers today.

My eyes immediately searched for number eleven. But I was surprised when he suddenly appeared in front of me, smiling. He was drenched in sweat, but I could still smell his scent—fabric conditioner allegations never lose.

The crowd went wild again, and I knew we were back on the screen above, but neither of us paid attention to it.

We just stared at each other.

"Hi, baby," he said.

I smiled. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," he replied. "I want to hug you right now, but I'm still sweaty."

"Yeah, later. I don't want to get covered in sweat."

I burst out laughing when he looked offended. But that didn't last long because he quickly kissed me on the lips. Shit, in front of everyone!

I covered my ears as the crowd screamed again, while number eleven looked incredibly proud of himself. And of course, we were trending online again that day. I've lost count already.

And three days later, Westmore University also won game 2 of the finals, retaining their title as kings of men's collegiate volleyball, with number eleven once again crowned as the season MVP.

Epilogue 3

"Happy birthday, number eleven!"

I couldn’t stop laughing at the look on his face when he opened the door for me.

There he was, standing there in a sleeveless shirt and jersey shorts, hair all messy, looking dazed and staring at me like he wasn’t sure if I was real or just a hologram. Well, it seems like neither of us functions well when woken up suddenly.

I couldn’t blame him if he thought he was still dreaming.

I mean, who expects their boyfriend to surprise them at their condo at midnight? Honestly, I don’t know what got into me either.

"Surprise!" I said with a big smile.

"Baby?" he asked, as if it finally sank in that I was really standing in front of him. "How did you get here?" His voice was still groggy.

So unfair. Why doesn’t his face look oily when he’s just woken up? Is there ever a time when he’s not ridiculously handsome? We both have eyes, noses, and mouths—so why is he like this? Ugh…

"I asked Carlos," I answered, still laughing.

Actually, we had talked earlier around 9 PM. The last thing he told me before saying goodnight and heading to bed was that he’d pick me up from the dorm tomorrow so we could go on a date. What he didn’t know was that I had other plans, and here we are—mission successful because he was completely shocked to see me outside his condo unit.

I noticed number eleven glance at the backpack slung over my shoulder, then at the suitcase and the cake box I was holding. His mouth dropped open, his ears turned red, and then he looked back at me.

"Happy birthday, baby," I greeted him again.

He smiled and pulled me close to hug me. Instantly, his familiar scent hit my nose. It was so relaxing. Could we just stay like this forever? It felt like his arms were made to hold me, and his chest was made for me to lean on whenever he hugged me.

I hugged him back with one arm.

"Thank you, baby," he whispered, and I felt him kiss the top of my head. "Thank you."

"It’s nothing," I replied.

"But, baby," he said, pulling away from the hug. He was looking at me tenderly. "As much as possible, don’t travel alone this late at night, okay? It’s not safe. I mean, you can, as long as you’re with someone you trust—or as long as you’re with me."

I was a bit taken aback. "Oh, sorry. I just really wanted to be the first one to greet you. I won’t do it again."

"It’s okay," he said, hugging me again. "But thank you for the surprise. I really, really appreciate it."

"You’re welcome. Were you surprised?"

"Yeah," he said, still using that bedroom voice of his.

"Sorry if I woke you up. But are you happy?"

"Even if there was no surprise, I'm always happy whenever I'm with you, baby."

I laughed, but deep inside, I was feeling kilig. Sometimes this number eleven is annoying, you know? He's supposed to be the one feeling shy around me, but he always finds ways to turn the situation around.

"Do you want your birthday kiss?" I asked as I pulled away from the hug again.

I saw a flicker of challenge in his eyes, but he quickly grinned and nodded excitedly. Oops, I think I already regret offering. You see, when he gets playful, he gives me what he calls "a thousand kisses."

And I mean it—he literally leaves no spot on my face untouched. But honestly, I don't fight it. I just let him because I secretly enjoy it too.

"But can we go inside first? It's embarrassing for the CCTV guard in your building—we might give them a show," I joked.

"Alright," number eleven chuckled, and the first thing he grabbed was my suitcase. "What's with the suitcase?"

It was my turn to grin. One of my surprises, baby. "I'll explain later."

We went inside his unit. This was my third time visiting, but I was still amazed by how spacious, beautiful, and clean it was. The design and theme were minimalist, but you could tell a rich kid lived here. Almost everything was dark blue and white—just like his style. And I expected it to be clean since he's meticulous about his appearance. It would've been more surprising if his place was messy.

I placed my backpack on the carpeted living room floor. Number eleven sat beside me and watched as I took out the cake from its box along with a lighter to light the candle.

Afterward, I held it up and faced him with a smile.

For a moment, I paused to admire number eleven's face illuminated by the candlelight. With the dim lighting in his living room, I could clearly see how much effort God must've put into creating him.

And I was so lucky… because he was mine.

"Happy birthday to you…" I started singing.

As I sang, number eleven stared at me intently. I did the same to him. I didn't care if I was off-key—the pounding of my heart was louder than anything else right now.

"I know you already wished for me," I teased after finishing the song. Number eleven laughed. "But make another wish anyway. Choose between world peace or ending poverty."

Number eleven laughed again but closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked at me first before blowing out the candle.

I even caught a whiff of his breath—but why did it smell so minty? Didn't he just wake up? So unfair.

"What did you wish for?" I asked.

"Secret," he smiled.
I pouted. "It’s just the two of us here, you know."

"It won’t come true if I tell you."

"Fair enough. You have a point," I said, glancing at the backpack I brought. I picked it up and grinned widely at him. "I have a gift for you."

I could see the excitement in number eleven’s eyes, but he tried to play it cool. I don’t know why, but instead of looking cool, he ended up looking cute.

I opened the backpack and took out part one of my first gift to him. I had wrapped it carefully in dark blue wrapping paper. I handed it to him, and I swear I was more excited than he was as he carefully unwrapped it. He was so gentle with the wrapper—I almost wanted to tell him to just tear it open, but I let him do it his way. I couldn’t help but smile when I saw how amazed he was with his first gift.

It was a Matcha Kit.

A double-walled glass bowl, a bamboo whisk (chasen), a matcha whisk holder, a measuring spoon, and a sifter. I also included unsweetened matcha powder because, honestly, what’s the point of the kit without the matcha itself, right?

"That’s what I thought of for when you crave a matcha latte—you can make it in your dorm or here in your condo," I explained, feeling a bit shy. "Wait, you don’t already have one of these, right?"

Instead of answering, number eleven suddenly hugged me tightly. I laughed and hugged him back.

"Thank you so much, baby," he said.

"You’re welcome. Do you like it?"

"Yes," he nodded repeatedly.

"That’s only the first gift."

As soon as I said that, number eleven quickly pulled away and looked at me in shock.

I smirked, grabbed the backpack again, and took out part two of my first gift. It was a gold necklace similar to the one he gave me for my birthday—the one I was wearing today. The only difference was the pendant. Mine had a volleyball, while his had the number eleven.

His mouth dropped open as he stared at it.

"Baby... Wow..." he said. "You didn’t have to—"

"Forget it. I already bought it," I interrupted him. "Now we match," I said, showing him the necklace he gave me. "Put it on me, quick."

Number eleven still seemed surprised, so I moved behind him to put the necklace on him. Just as I imagined, it suited him perfectly. Well, everything suits him—including me—but it was satisfying to see him wearing something I bought for him.

I took out my phone. "Let’s take a picture—"

But before I could finish, number eleven pulled me onto his lap, and before I could react, he kissed me.

Honestly, I lost track of how long we stayed like that. All I knew was that we were both breathless when we finally pulled apart.

And it seemed like number eleven was just taking a break because he leaned in again to kiss me. But I stopped myself from getting carried away. I pressed my finger to his lips to block the kiss before things got out of hand.

"I'm not done yet. I have another gift for you," I said, getting up from his lap.

"Huh?" he asked, his eyes still dreamy.

"I have another gift for you."

"What? Another one?"

"Yep. Is your passport here in your condo?"

"My passport?"

I nodded and smiled at him again. "We're going to Thailand."

He furrowed his brow. "Huh?"

"We're going to Thailand," I repeated, laughing at his reaction.
Did you think you were the only one good at surprises? "We're leaving now."

"Baby, are you serious? Right now?"
"Yes, I am. Like, we're leaving now," I said, pouting towards my suitcase. "Pack your things. We'll be there for 3 days and 2 nights. Our flight is at 4:30 AM. Take a shower. I'll wait for you here."

But number eleven didn't move right away. He just stared at me with his mouth slightly open. I wasn't sure if he was still drunk from the kiss or if he couldn't believe we were actually leaving the country tonight.

"You're really not joking, baby?"

"I'm not," I laughed. "Don't you want to go? Should I just go alone then—"

"No! Of course, I'll go with you. Give me 30 minutes."

That might have been the fastest I've ever seen number eleven move.
I helped him pack, but he only brought one backpack because he said he'd just buy more clothes in Thailand. Typical rich kid problems.

And so, after more than three hours of travel, we finally arrived in Bangkok.

Wow… this was what it felt like to leave the country with number eleven. We always traveled together, just the two of us, but going to another country with him felt different. There was the thrill and excitement, mixed with a little nervousness—but that nervousness disappeared quickly because he was with me.

If only number eleven could hear what I was thinking sometimes, he'd definitely feel kilig.

"It's pretty warm here too, huh?" I said to number eleven as we ate pad thai and mango sticky rice. That was the first thing we did after dropping our things off at the hotel. And of course, we argued again about who

would pay. I insisted it was my treat since this was my gift to him, but number eleven wouldn't budge. He said he'd pay since I already covered our plane tickets.
"Let's go to Japan next so I can wear winter clothes," I teased.

Number eleven smiled as he wiped the corner of my lips. "Anywhere's fine with me as long as I'm with you."

"Naks. Same," I grinned at his cheesy line. "Or Korea. I haven't been there yet."

"North?" he joked, laughing.

I smacked his arm. "Of course, South!"

Well, North Korea could be interesting too, but for now, South Korea first.

After taking pictures while eating, we explored the tourist spots in Bangkok. Number eleven didn't let me walk around too much because I was still recovering from my injury. Honestly, I had even forgotten I was injured because I was so excited riding the Tuk Tuk and touring the capital of Thailand.

The itinerary I had painstakingly researched went out the window because number eleven and I ended up doing a food trip instead. But I didn't mind—we still had two more days here. Besides, it was his birthday, so his wishes came first.

By the time we returned to our hotel room, it hit me that this was the first time we'd be sharing a room together, just the two of us, in a faraway place.

I was nervous, but excitement outweighed it.

Because… this was where my next gift to him came in.

"Did you have fun today, baby?" he asked as he hugged me tightly.

"I should be the one asking that," I replied. "Did you enjoy yourself? This was supposed to be Japan, but this was all my budget could handle," I added with a laugh.

"You already know the answer to that," he smiled before kissing me softly on the lips. "As long as I'm with you, no matter where it is, I know I'll enjoy it."

I smiled back. "Happy birthday again."

"Thank you, baby," he said softly.

"Actually, uh, I have one more gift for you."

Number eleven pulled away from the hug and looked at me with a furrowed brow. "Another one?"

I nodded and smirked. But honestly, I was starting to get nervous again.

You can do this, Kai.

"Yeah. But can I take a shower first?"

He blinked. "Sure, baby."

I went into the bathroom and immediately turned on the shower to wet myself and calm my nerves. That's when I noticed how fast my heart was pounding.

Kai, you're already here.
You and number eleven are here together.
You can do this.
You shouldn't overthink this anymore.

For the last time, I took a deep breath, opened the bathroom door, and peeked out. "Roen," I called, and number eleven quickly turned to look at me. He had been standing by the window, scrolling through my phone. His smile quickly turned into panic.

"Sorry. I was just looking at our pictures earlier—"

"No, it's okay," I interrupted him.

He placed my phone back on the table and walked toward me. My chest was pounding so hard. Tsk. Kai, he hasn't even gotten close yet!

"Is something wrong, baby? Do you need anything?"

"Uh," I swallowed nervously.

It's now or never, Kai.

"What is it?"

I took another deep breath. I could feel my whole face heating up, but I gathered every ounce of courage I had left to look him straight in the eyes.

"Uh, I just wanted to ask… if you'd like to join me in… the shower?"

His lips parted. When he didn't respond right away, it felt like I'd been doused with cold water, and I just wanted to sink into the floor. I quickly apologized and was about to close the door again when number eleven stopped me.

We locked eyes.

My lips parted slightly.

And that's when I noticed his gaze drop to my lips as his eyes softened with desire. "I thought you'd never ask," he murmured, pushing the door open and pulling me into a kiss as we both stood soaked under the running water.

Epilogue 4

"Creston University's starting libero, wearing jersey number eleven, Kaizen Reyes!"

It’s game day today.

This is also my first time back on the taraflex since recovering from the ACL tear I suffered last year. I’ve been part of the lineup for the entire season, but Coach only put me in today because this match is important.

I can feel the excitement and adrenaline rushing through my body as I high-five my teammates and the coaching staff.

It feels so good to finally be back on the court. I missed receiving serves—hopefully, I can still do it well. I missed digging powerful spikes. And I really missed playing in front of a huge crowd like this at the arena today.

"Let’s go Creston! Let’s go!" cheered the supporters of our school.

Wow… time really flies, doesn’t it? It feels like just yesterday I got injured. I still remember the pain in my knee back then. And of course, how could I forget the confession I made that same day to number eleven? I even prioritized that over thinking about my knee.

And now here I am today, back in action.

I barely noticed the days passing by. After our trip to Thailand, both number eleven and I got busy again. He’s in his 4th year now, and I’m in my 3rd year of college and my 3rd playing year.

Can you believe it? It feels like just yesterday I was a rookie on the team. Now I’m co-captain and one of the seniors leading and guiding the new rookies. There’s pressure, but I’m really enjoying it.

Speaking of the team, Creston participated again in the off-season tournament last year. And from winning bronze, they brought home silver this time!

We lost to Westmore in the finals, but I saw how much the team had improved to keep up with the in-season champions. And think about it—they faced Westmore’s Team A! The only player missing from their lineup was number eleven, and yet they pushed the game to five sets. That’s a big deal.

Speaking of number eleven, he already introduced me to his parents.

And I still vividly remember how nervous I was that day. I wanted to tell number eleven to stop the car in the middle of the road just so I could avoid meeting his parents.

I think I was even more nervous than when I asked him to join me in the shower in Thailand.

At least, I hoped my nervousness would turn into comfort and care—Hey, Kaizen! What comfort?!

I mean, warmth and care!

I hoped that after meeting his parents, my nervousness would turn into warmth and care, just like what number eleven gave me in Thailand. But instead, my poor heart might just upgrade its nerves to palpitations.

"I’m really nervous," I said, exhaling deeply over and over again.

"Baby, relax," number eleven chuckled, glancing at me while driving us to their house in Parañaque.

"I swear, I've been trying to relax since earlier, but I think I might actually throw up."

Number eleven laughed even harder. Look at him, laughing like crazy. He's so happy because he didn't feel nervous at all when I introduced him to my mom. He even felt so at home when we went to Baguio and stayed at my place. Not even a bit of the confidence he had back then rubbed off on me. Tsk.

"Baby, there's nothing to be nervous about. They just want to formally meet you. That's it," he said softly, but it didn't really help calm me down.

I wanted to scream,
"Stop the car!"

"What if I say I have diarrhea?"

"Nope," he smirked.

"Or what if I say I have an emergency?"

"Nope."

"Or what if I say I had a wardrobe malfunction?"

"What?" He laughed again.

In the end, I just gave up because number eleven clearly had no plans to postpone introducing me to his parents. But then I thought, why should I delay it anyway? Whether today or some other day, I'd still have to meet them because they're the parents of my boyfriend. Plus, it would be embarrassing for them since they were the ones who invited me to their house today.

I was trying to calm myself when I felt number eleven take my hand and kiss the back of it. He looked at me and smiled, and somehow, like magic, my mind and body relaxed a little.

But the nervousness came rushing back when we arrived at their huge house. I knew number eleven's family was wealthy, but… wow. Seeing it in person made me realize just how much of a rich kid he really is.

"Baby," I heard him call out to me as we got out of the car.

He approached me and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes for a moment because of it.

"Feeling better now?" he asked.

"No," I shook my head and laughed. "But we're here now, so I'll face this."

He smiled.

We stood there staring at each other for a few seconds before I shifted my gaze to the bouquet of flowers I was holding and the fruit basket number eleven was carrying.

"Are these gifts okay? Maybe your mom or dad has something specific they like?"

"These are fine, baby."

"What about how I look? Am I underdressed?"

I looked at what I was wearing. I had on a white short-sleeved polo, black pants, and loafers. I was also wearing a wristwatch and the necklace number eleven gave me.

Actually, we were dressed almost the same. The only difference was that he was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was also wearing the necklace I gave him.

He looked so handsome today. I thought I looked fine the last time I checked in the mirror, but because of how nervous I was on the way here, I was worried I might have sweated too much. I didn't want his parents to see us together and suddenly think we didn't match because I looked messy.

I saw number eleven smile again.

And I was a bit surprised when he quickly kissed me on the lips.

"Baby, you look handsome today."

"Only today?"

He laughed and kissed me again.

"You always look great in my eyes."

I just shook my head and laughed. I don't know what to do with you, number eleven.

"Shall we go?" he asked, intertwining our hands.

"Wait," I said. "I'm really nervous. What if… what if they suddenly don't like me?"

Number eleven turned to face me and cupped my cheek.

I looked up at him, full of nervousness, but the moment our eyes met, I knew I could handle anything.

"Just be yourself, baby. I'm very sure they're going to like you even more. And remember, I'm always here for you, okay? Always."

I nodded and smiled. And number eleven was right. I really had nothing to worry about.

His parents were so kind. They were thrilled to meet me. I immediately felt like they treated me like their own child. It warmed my heart because they accepted us. They accepted me. And most importantly, they accepted number eleven. I could clearly see the support and love they had for him.

"Welcome to the family, Kai," number eleven's mom said before we left. "We're so happy to finally meet the source of my son's happiness."

Would it be too cheesy if I cried right in front of them? Thankfully, I held it back because that would've been embarrassing. But wow… that was when I truly realized how lucky we are because the people around us support us.

Maybe number eleven and I were really good in our past lives, which is why we're blessed with people who accept us now.

And I'm so grateful for that.

I'm so thankful to my parents, my friends, and especially to Roen for coming into my life.

"Westmore University's outside hitter, wearing jersey number eleven, Roen Alejo!"

The crowd erupted in cheers, so I turned to look at them as the players from Westmore University were being introduced. It's always fun when the arena is packed with supporters from both teams—or even those who aren't supporting anyone but are avid volleyball fans who just want to watch live games.

The arena was almost evenly divided into two colors: dark blue for Westmore supporters and white for Creston. It was jam-packed today because this wasn't just any match.

It's Game 2 of the finals.

And yes, it's Creston versus Westmore in the final series!

After how many years, Creston has finally made it back to the championship game!
Can you believe it? Seriously, it still hasn't fully sunk in for the team that we're playing for the gold medal today. This is such a huge achievement, especially considering how much Creston struggled during the preliminary rounds.

We were ranked 4th and had to defeat the 3rd-ranked Northville once, then the 2nd-ranked Easton twice, to make it to the finals against the undefeated Westmore team.

A Cinderella run, indeed.

And that's when I realized that manifesting really works. Just last year, I dreamed of making it to the finals, and here we are now. The only downside is that we lost Game 1, so it's do-or-die for us today—otherwise, Westmore will become champions for the fifth consecutive season.

The crowd erupted in cheers as we took our positions on the court. I saw Jerome pointing at the screen above, and when I looked up, there was a split-screen of me and number eleven.

I just shook my head and smiled.

And when I glanced at the other side of the court, I immediately caught his eyes—he was watching me again.

He was already in full game-face mode.

This baby of mine is so serious!

So what did I do? I winked at him. Mission accomplished—I clearly saw his entire face turn red as the whole arena shook with cheers.

"That's it, Kai, distract Alejo!" Jerome shouted.

"What the hell, Roen?" Carlos chimed in, who was back in the lineup this season. I laughed while number eleven pouted like a child. He looked so serious earlier, but I forgot how easy it is to make him flustered.

The referee blew the whistle. Westmore was serving first, so I got ready to receive. As expected, their setter unleashed a powerful jump serve. The crowd screamed, but I smirked when I executed a perfect receive.

Shit, I can still receive!

"Nice pass, Kai!" Coach shouted from the sidelines.

"Turn it off!" I yelled back.

Jerome barely moved for the second ball and quickly executed a combination play. But Westmore deflected Drew's spike!

I immediately positioned myself for defense. Their libero cleanly passed the ball to their setter, and who else would he set it to? Of course, their ace spiker, number eleven.

The crowd erupted again as he soared into the air. That's always the challenge when he spikes—he jumps so high and seems to float mid-air. I couldn't immediately read where he'd hit the ball—would he go down the line, cross-court, or drop it suddenly?

I smirked again when he went cross-court, and I blocked his spike.

Shit, it's so satisfying when I block him!

Well, sorry, but there's no "baby, baby" here, number eleven.

Creston's supporters cheered because of that. I made an excellent dig, and the ball landed perfectly with Jerome, who quickly set it to Kiko for a B-quick. And boom! The first point of the match goes to Creston University!

"Nice one!" I said as we celebrated the point.

But honestly, I kind of regretted saying there's no "baby, baby" in the game. My boyfriend, number eleven, was already showing off, shaking his jersey. He can be so arrogant sometimes.

But his arrogance disappeared when he almost facial-hit me again at the start of Set 2. To be honest, I panicked. I thought I was going to get hit, but thankfully, I dodged the ball just in time.

I also saw the fear in number eleven's eyes, but I signaled to him that I was okay. Still, it seemed like he was more shaken than I was because after that, he avoided spiking toward me entirely. I didn't even get a chance to dig his spikes.

The game continued, with neither of us able to pull far ahead in the score. But you could see from my teammates' faces that they weren't stressed—they were just enjoying the moment, even when Westmore reached championship point.

And honestly, so was I.

During our final timeout, I just told them that no matter the outcome of this final series, I was incredibly proud of how hard the team fought this season.

Imagine—we were ranked 4th after the prelims, yet we still made it to the finals.

It wasn't about being negative or giving up early; it's just that our opponents were stronger this time. Maybe it's not our year to be champions yet, but I know we'll get there. As I told them, there's always next year to win the gold medal. As long as I have playing years left—and as long as we're together—we'll fight for Creston University.

For now, we'll clap for the success of others.

But I know our time will come when we'll be the ones receiving applause. If not at the collegiate level, maybe at the professional level, right? For now, we'll just keep fighting.

"Congratulations," I said to number eleven a week after the championship game.

We were at his condo now. Both of us were still tired from our recent trips. He had just returned from Bali, where they celebrated their victory party. I, on the other hand, came back from Hong Kong, where our team manager treated us to Disneyland to celebrate our silver medal.

I was leaning against his chest now while he played with my fingers. We were both naked under the blanket on his bed.

I thought we were just going to talk…

Even though number eleven was tired from traveling, he still managed to… well, you know. He's a volleyball player, after all. His stamina is insane. He said he missed me, and I missed him too, but I didn't expect… well, you know.

Now we're even more exhausted.

But I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it.

"Thank you, baby," his voice was still hoarse.

"You're unbelievable. You won so many awards. Westmore's 5-peat champions. You're MVP again. Best Outside Hitter too. And you're already a shoo-in for the national team. Good luck at the SEA Games. Do your best, okay?"

I felt him hug me and kiss the top of my head.

"Baby," he called out, ignoring everything I just said.

"Hm?"

"You don't know yet?"

"What?"

"Your coach didn't tell you?"

I furrowed my brow, sat up straight, and turned to look at number eleven, who was lazily lying there. His eyes were dreamy, his hair messy. I couldn't help but notice the red mark on his neck, but I decided to ignore it for now.

"Our coach? Why? What's going on?"

"So, he wants me to deliver the good news instead of him," he whispered, sitting up properly and facing me. I couldn't help but admire his broad chest and abs.

"Wait, what? This sounds nerve-wracking."

He laughed. "Congratulations, baby."

"Huh?"

"You're also part of the national team."

"Huh?!"

Number eleven laughed even harder and pulled me into a hug. He congratulated me again, but my brain seemed to stop working. It still hadn’t sunk in! What did he just say?

Me? Part of the national team?

"No way?" I asked again as I pulled away from his hug.

"Yes, baby," he said, kissing the tip of my nose. "Finally, we’re teammates, huh?"

I don’t know why, but I started crying. Number eleven laughed and pulled me into another hug. Wow… I didn’t see this coming! Me? On the national team? One of the liberos representing the Philippines? Receiving spikes from number eleven? With number eleven as my teammate? Shit… I couldn’t believe it.

This was just a dream before, and now it’s real. Thank you, Lord.

"I’m so proud of you," he whispered. "I know you’re going to do great. But I have one question."

I pulled away from the hug, and number eleven gently wiped the tears from my cheeks. Then he looked at me tenderly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Since we’re teammates now in the national team, who’s going to wear jersey number eleven?"

My mouth dropped open, but slowly, I started smiling. Instead of answering him right away, I moved to sit on his lap. My smile didn’t fade when I saw his eyes soften as he watched my every move.

I placed my hands on both of his shoulders and stared deeply into his eyes. He tilted his head up, and I felt him beneath me.

"You," I whispered, my voice hoarse, before kissing him softly on the lips. "You’ll always be number eleven, Roen."

Special chapter 1

"Number eleven? What are you doing here?"

I smiled as soon as Kai opened the door to his room. There he was—my baby, Alejo. He looked so cute and cuddly in his white pajamas, rubbing his eyes. I knew I had disturbed his sleep, but I really wanted to see one of my favorite sights in the world: his morning face.

I grabbed his waist and smirked when I saw him flush a little. There it was—another one of my favorite sights, his kilig face.

"Good morning, baby," I greeted him, kissing his soft lips.

"Good morning," he replied. "Wait, I haven't brushed my teeth yet."

"It's fine. I'll still kiss you even if you don't have teeth."

"Really? What if all my teeth fall out?"

My forehead creased. "What's 'fall out' again?"

"I just woke up, number eleven. I'm not in the mood to be your translator."

We both laughed as we entered his room.

God, I already missed him, even though we're just in the same building. This is all Coach's fault. They put me and my baby in separate rooms because they're scared I might do something naughty to Kai.

Of course, I might do something!

He's my baby! I'll do something as long as I have his consent.

I suddenly remembered our first night in Thailand last year. Every time I think about it, I can't help but smile—and sometimes laugh like an idiot to myself. It was one of the happiest moments of my life, and my most unforgettable birthday—not because of the intimate moment we shared, but primarily because he trusted me enough to do it with me.

"Hala, it's only 5 AM?" Kai said while looking at his phone. I didn't respond. I just busied myself cuddling him because I didn't get the chance to do this last night. Coach is really annoying for separating my baby from me. "Why are you visiting my room so early?"

"That's because I missed you," I murmured.

"We're only two rooms apart," he said, starting to play with my hair.

I didn't answer. Instead, I buried my face in the crook of his neck, breathing in his scent. And damn, Kai smells so good. He smells like a baby—my baby.

"You're really going to get in trouble with Coach if he finds out you came here to my room," he added.

"I don't care," I countered.

"What if he really benches you during today's game?"

I looked at him, frowning slightly. "We're not doing anything. I'm not doing anything. I'm just hugging you. Unless..." I began smirking as I teased him. "Unless what?"

"Unless you want us to do something—"

But my words were cut short when he slapped my arm. I laughed and rested my face back on his neck to smell him some more. God, his scent is addicting. I could stay here forever.

"You're such a tease," he giggled.

"Can we just stay like this all day?"

"No way. The Filipino people will be mad at you. Their taxes paid for us to come here to Malaysia."

I smiled. "You're really excited to play for the country, huh?"

"Of course! It's every player's dream. It's my dream too, you know. It's different when you have the Philippine flag on your jersey," he replied, and I nodded because I feel the same way. "Do you think we'll win today? Thailand is our first opponent."

"Of course, baby," I said proudly.

"You're so arrogant. What if you don't score today?"

"Speaking of Thailand and scoring, I'm just wondering… can we shower together—"

"You're such a pervert, number eleven."

I laughed and wiggled my eyebrows. "I'm just suggesting, baby. To conserve water, let's shower together. Just like what we did last year in Bangkok."

"Don't remind me! I told you not to hang out too much with Jerome. Look what you've learned from them."

"Why? You looked so hot when you invited me to join you—"

"Roen!" His voice was full of warning.

"Fine, fine," I said, laughing and giving up my naughty thoughts. "Let's take a picture instead. Where's your phone, baby?"

"I haven't washed my face yet," he pouted while grabbing his phone.

Damn.

Didn't he know that his lips are my weakness?

I cleared my throat, trying to gather all my strength not to stare at his tempting lips. Calm down, Alejo. "Me too, baby. I haven't washed my face yet."

"So, you came straight here after waking up?"

"Mhm."

Kai shook his head while smiling.

That’s right, baby. I’m this whipped for you.

"Come on, let’s take a picture," he said.

We took a few pictures. Kai asked me to pose in different ways, and I happily obliged. Is it bad to gatekeep him after seeing how beautiful his smile is in those pictures? But on the other hand, I also want the world to know how lucky I am to see that smile of his up close almost every day.

"You look handsome here, baby," I told him while looking at the last picture we took. We were both looking at the camera, but there was something magical about his smile that made my heart race faster.

"You’re the handsome one. Look at you. Even with just a small smile, you’re still photogenic."

"Nah. That’s just my regular face," I laughed, but the truth is, I’m so happy whenever he compliments me. If Kai tells me I’m handsome, I’d believe him.

"You’re so arrogant! And you haven’t even washed your face yet!" he said, laughing, and I just shook my head while smiling. "Should I send this to you?"

"Sure, baby. I’ll post it on my account."

"Okay," he mumbled, and after a few seconds, my phone vibrated. "Sent!"

I took out my phone and immediately saved the picture. Then I went to my Instagram profile to post it.

"What caption are you going to use?" Kai asked, looking at my phone screen.

I smiled and kissed his cheek. "First game as teammates."

His lips parted, but he smiled right after.

He once told me that he fell in love with me because of my smile. He knew I liked him way back during high school at Palarong Pambansa. But what he didn’t know was that I fell for him first because of his smile, too.

I remember it vividly. It was a sunny afternoon, and we had just finished our game against the CALABARZON team. Carlos basically dragged me to watch the next match between CAR and the Bicol Region. I remember trying not to strangle my self-proclaimed best friend because I was so tired that day and just wanted to rest to save energy for our next game. But the guy was so persistent, so to stop him from pestering me, I decided to just go with him.

So, thinking about it now, if Carlos hadn’t forced me that day, I wouldn’t have seen Kai.

I lazily sat down until the players from CAR were called. And for some reason, the smallest boy with round eyes caught my attention. My lips parted as I watched him walk onto the court. He looked so thin and small in his green jersey with the number eleven and his surname Reyes on the back.

My eyes were fixated on him the entire time.

I didn’t know what happened to me, but I just found myself watching his every move like a creep. The way he stood beside his tall teammates… the way he looked around the venue… the way he talked to others… and the way he smiled… oh god, his smile… there was something about his smile that I couldn’t look away from.

There was something about his smile that made my heart race… that made my insides flip… that made me feel things I'd never felt before.

And believe me or not, I tried to look away.

I tried not to overthink things.

But newsflash—I failed miserably. My eyes kept going back to him.

What is this? A crush? The ever-cliché love at first sight? Is it really possible to like someone that instantly? Wait, he's a boy… so, am I gay? But does it matter when it comes to liking someone?

I closed my eyes until I heard the referee's whistle signaling the start of their match. And when I opened my eyes, his beautiful smile was the first thing I saw.

And that was it.

I knew I had to know him.

Reyes, huh? What about his first name? What's his name? He's from CAR… where exactly? Damn, I should've paid more attention in geography class.

What school is he from? What grade is he in? Are we in the same grade? How old is he? He looks young. And he's wearing a different color jersey… so he's a libero? That explains his smallness…

Those were the questions and thoughts running through my mind as I watched him play spectacularly.

And seeing him receive and dig those powerful spikes effortlessly, and the way he smiled every time they celebrated a point—that was the moment I confirmed to myself that I really wanted to know more about him.

I needed to see more of his smile.

His last name is Reyes, he's a libero, he's wearing jersey number eleven, and he's from CAR.

But that was the only information I managed to gather about him that day. Unfortunately, they lost the match, so our teams didn't get to face each other in the next round. And the frustrating part? That was the last time I ever saw him. I didn't even get his first name!

I don't know what came over me, but I decided to change my jersey number from six to eleven just because I couldn't get him out of my mind in the days that followed.

To be honest, during my rookie year at Westmore, there was a time when I thought about changing it back to my original number. But I decided against it because, aside from getting used to being called *Roen Eleven* by my teammates, it somehow gave me peace knowing that I shared the same jersey number with that boy, wherever he was. Sounds corny, but… yeah.

At that time, I didn't know if I'd ever see him again. I tried checking the lineups of other schools to see if they had recruited a libero with the last name Reyes, but there was no one. I figured he either went to college somewhere in CAR or was still in high school.

So, I tried not to think about him.

Besides… it was just a simple crush. A normal feeling, but nothing more.

I just focused on my rookie year.

And honestly, it was fun and thrilling. Collegiate volleyball is very different from high school, but I was glad I adjusted quickly. We won the championship that year. I did some commercials and interviews too. I even had a girlfriend, but we broke up after just six months, and it was entirely my fault. I shouldn't have let it drag on for months if I knew from the start that I wasn't sure of my feelings and was still figuring things out about myself.

And just when I thought the libero boy from Palarong Pambansa was one of those people who would simply pass through my life, Carlos found him on Instagram the following school year.

Well, damn. All it took was that beautiful smile of his, and my heart started racing all over again.

So, his name is Kaizen, huh?

Kaizen Reyes.

What a cute name for the cutest person I've ever laid eyes on.

And he's a rookie at Creston University. He's still a libero, and wow—he's still wearing the same jersey number. Number eleven. I found myself smiling, knowing that we now share the same number. God, I'm so glad I didn't change my jersey number back to six. That was a close call, though.

"Roen, he might melt from how much you're staring at him. Creston might suddenly lose their libero," Carlos whispered while laughing.

"Shut the hell up," I glared at him, then shifted my gaze back to the court.

But the asshole seemed to be enjoying himself. He just laughed and had the audacity to poke my cheek. "Just introduce yourself, dude. Also, follow him on IG already. You're such a hopeless romantic, you know that?"

I glared at him even more. But what else could I expect from Carlos? He just laughed and walked away before I could punch him.

And I don't know… after that, things happened so quickly. One moment, I caught him looking at me… and a few minutes later, he was lying on the floor, holding his face because I accidentally gave him a facial hit.

And the rest was history.

I love you, Kai. Always.

Special chapter 2

"From the Philippines, outside spiker, wearing jersey number eleven, Roen Alejo!"

I laughed as the supporters of Team Philippines erupted in cheers inside the arena. Actually, they had been cheering loudly for every player called up for the starting six since earlier. They seemed tireless, and it was incredibly heartwarming to see how many of them were here at the venue. Most were OFWs, but some even traveled all the way from the Philippines just to be here.

Filipinos really know how to support their own. This is my second national team stint, but I'm still amazed by the unwavering support of our kababayans. And they're not backing down against the Vietnamese either—our opponents today and also the host country.

Their cheers were especially loud when number eleven was announced. That baby of mine is so famous. Of course, I joined in cheering for him too.

"Go Philippines! Go number eleven!" I shouted.

I saw number eleven glance back at me. He smiled and then winked, and I noticed the crowd's cheers growing even louder. Some of our teammates teased me, nudging and pushing me playfully.

I just laughed, feeling both amused and flustered. Oh no, for sure there's already a TikTok video of this moment. This time, it's the international edition. I wouldn't even be surprised if we ended up trending again on social media pages from other countries.

Of course, the one who's happiest about that is my boyfriend. Though he won't admit it, he gets more kilig than I do whenever we watch videos of us together. Especially those with romantic background music and slideshows of our pictures. His ears turn so red when that happens—it's adorable.

I often tease him about it, but most of the time, he just buries his face in my neck out of embarrassment. Ironically, he's usually the reason we trend anyway.

"I hope we win," I said to Jerome, who's also part of the national team with me now.

The only thing is, we're bench players. We're not part of the starting six. He's the backup setter, and I'm the backup libero. But honestly, I'm okay being the second libero for now. International games are different—they double the nerves. Plus, our starting libero, Kuya Mikey, is incredible.

"We'll win. Alejo's here, isn't he?" Jerome replied confidently.

"I hope so," I sighed deeply as I watched number eleven, who was now in full game-face mode.

He's already in serious mode. You'd think he's not the type to act all lovey-dovey with me, right?

"But I still can't get over the fact that you're not wearing jersey number eleven," Jerome teased.

I glanced down at my jersey. It's number 27—the number I chose because it's number eleven's birthdate.

"Same here. I'm not used to it either," I laughed. "But it's fine. I'm on the bench anyway."

"True," Jerome chuckled. "You should've seen yourself laughing earlier—you looked like you weren't even sitting on the bench."

We both giggled, but I quickly straightened up when I realized number eleven was looking at us, frowning slightly.

Oh no. He’s jealous again. And the game hasn’t even started yet!

I stopped laughing, though Jerome couldn’t stop smirking. The idiot even put his arm around me to irritate number eleven further. I just shook my head and gave my grumpy baby a reassuring smile, hoping he wouldn’t let it affect his game.

But it didn’t seem to work—he pouted and turned back to face the net.

"Your baby’s so easy to tease, Kai," Jerome whispered.

"You’re such a troublemaker, captain. Aren’t you scared of his wrath?" I replied, which only made him laugh harder. "I’ll make it up to him later."

"It’s good that Alejo gets jealous, though. Look, he’ll take out all his frustration on the opposing team. That’s why I’m sure we’ll win. Thank me later."

I just rolled my eyes at him. So full of himself!

But it seems I might actually have to thank Jerome because from the very start of Set 1, number eleven went into god mode. Almost everything set to him—even out-of-system plays—turned into automatic points!

"Here comes the boom!" the announcer shouted as number eleven spiked again, and the ball bounced off the floor. It almost reached the ceiling of the arena!

The cheers from our supporters grew even louder. Even some foreign nationals who were watching started clapping and cheering for number eleven, who was now shaking out his jersey. So arrogant, but that’s my boyfriend, Kaizen.

But he has every right to be proud. I’m so proud of him, especially now that foreign teams are interested in recruiting him to play abroad after seeing him perform.

So, I guess I should be the one bragging—he’s *my* future volleyball import. He’s just jealous because he’s handsome, so it’s understandable.

"Go Philippines!" we cheered from the bench as we won the first set with a score of 25-18.

I immediately handed number eleven a towel and a tumbler while he huddled with Coach before the start of Set 2. I couldn’t help but laugh because he was still scowling but came over to me anyway. He gently pulled me away from the team.

"Still jealous?" I asked as he drank some water. I took the towel from him and wiped the sweat off his face.

"Yeah," he muttered.

"You’re being silly. Jerome was just teasing you."

"I want to sit on the bench too," he said, sounding like a child.

I laughed and playfully hit his arm. There he goes speaking Tagalog again.

But seriously, he only switches to Tagalog when he’s jealous.

"You’re such a brat. You’ll get in trouble with the Filipino people if we lose today because of your attitude."

But he just scowled even more. "You’ll be the one in trouble with me later."

"Stop it! Listen to Coach."

I hit his arm again, but thankfully, he finally smiled. That's just how he is with threats—they don't scare him. In fact, they seem to excite him. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't like it.

I felt my face heat up, and number eleven caught me blushing, so he laughed and poked my side. I almost screamed because I'm super ticklish there, so I hit him with the towel.

I thought that was the end of our little playfight, but I was surprised when he suddenly grabbed my waist and kissed me quickly on the lips. My eyes widened, and I realized everyone was staring at us as the crowd erupted in cheers.

I quickly pulled away from number eleven, who was laughing despite being scolded by our coaches. I just bowed my head and hid behind Jerome.

What is wrong with you, Kai?

Your flirting with number eleven has reached Vietnam, of all places.

I'm sure Mom will scold us again. She'll tell us to keep our "baby time" in check.

But we're in a proper place, right? It's an international event, for heaven's sake.

Ugh, I don't even know anymore, Kaizen.

"Go Philippines! Go! Go! Go!" the supporters cheered as the second set began.

But unlike Set 1, where we completely dominated, Vietnam was catching up now. They adjusted their strategy and were guarding number eleven fiercely. They even set up triple blocks just to prevent him from scoring easily. Thankfully, number eleven is smart—he's hitting off the block now.

I looked up at the scoreboard. The score was close: 12-11 in favor of the Philippines.

Number eleven was up to serve, and he delivered a powerful jump serve. We almost jumped out of our seats when it nearly became a service ace, but Vietnam's setter managed to save it.

And just like that, I was hit with a flashback of the exact day I suffered my ACL tear injury.

The opponent's spiker dropped the ball, and I clearly saw how our libero, Kuya Mikey, landed with his knee hitting the floor first. The crowd gasped. Everything happened so fast—we could only watch as he screamed in pain.

I quickly looked away and closed my eyes.

Shit… I could feel my knee throbbing again.

"Don't look, Kai," Jerome said, already standing in front of me to block my view.

The referee blew the whistle. The game paused momentarily as the medics surrounded Kuya Mikey. They carried him off on a stretcher, and my fear returned when I heard him crying as they took him out of the venue.

I stared at the scene, frozen, until I jumped in surprise when Coach tapped me.

"Kai," he said, nodding at me.

At first, I didn’t understand what Coach meant. But my mouth dropped open when I realized he was putting me into the game.

My heart raced. I locked eyes with number eleven, who nodded at me encouragingly. I glanced at Jerome and the rest of my teammates—they were all smiling at me.

Shit… I completely forgot—I’m the backup libero!

Without thinking, I took off my jacket. Jerome took it from me, and I slowly walked onto the court. I locked eyes with number eleven again, who was now giving me a look that said, *"You’ve got this, Kai."*

But to be honest, I was starting to overthink. What if I can’t do it? What if I let the team down? What if I keep misreceiving? What if… I get injured again?

"Baby," number eleven softly called out to me as he approached. He held both of my elbows and bent down slightly so our eyes were level. "Are you okay?" he asked, concern evident in his voice.

"H-Huh?" I blinked. "Uhm, y-yeah. I’m okay."

"Are you sure? You look pale."

I bit my lip to make it turn red again. "I’m just nervous, but I’m fine. Really, I’m okay," I reassured him with a nod.

He stared at me for a few more seconds. It seemed like even number eleven was getting nervous. He knew I had trauma from those injuries. So, to snap him out of it, I patted him on the shoulder and smiled again, hoping to bring his focus back to the game.

"I’m okay. I can do this."

"You’ve got this, okay?"

I nodded again and took a deep breath.

My other teammates also approached me. Like number eleven, they gave me encouraging words. I thanked them, and then we took our positions on the court. The referee blew the whistle, signaling the resumption of the game, accompanied by loud cheers from our supporters and Jerome.

I can do this.

You can do this, Kai—

"Shit!" I shouted when Vietnam served, and it turned into a service ace on me. I stood there, mouth agape, watching the ball fly into the audience. The opposing supporters cheered, and then number eleven looked at me.

Damn, this is exactly what I was worried about! Overthinking led to a misreceive right away! How embarrassing! I wanted to just bury myself in the taraflex! If we lose this, it’ll be all my fault!

"Recover, Kai," Kuya Paolo, our setter and team captain, said during our huddle in the middle of the court.

Coach called a timeout. I looked up at the scoreboard and saw that Vietnam was now leading. 13-12. It was just one point, but it felt like they were already at match point. I wanted to cry.

"Kai, are you okay?" Coach immediately asked when we approached him.
I didn’t answer right away. I only realized someone had placed a hand on my head when I looked up and saw number eleven smiling at me while ruffling my hair.

"Let’s forget about that, okay? Let’s refocus. We’ll fight for Mikey, alright?"

"Yes, coach!"

"Kai, trust your passes, okay? I know you can do it!"

"Yes, coach," I replied, taking another deep breath. My teammates did the same. One by one, they jokingly messed up my hair, and somehow, the nervousness in my chest eased a little.

"Philippines!" we shouted, stacking our hands together in the middle after the timeout ended.

We returned to the court, and though the pressure was still there, this time I knew I could fight through it. Number eleven was right. So were Coach and my teammates. I can do this. I need to step up—for my injured teammate, for the Philippines, and of course, for myself.

That was just one misreceive, and the opponent wouldn’t get another chance to exploit me. Maybe I’d get nervous again later—after the game was truly over… after we’d won.

"Baby," number eleven called out to me.

I turned to him. "Yes?"

"I love you," he said softly.

Right. Why was I nervous or feeling pressured when I had number eleven on the same side of the court as me?

I smiled at him. "I love you."

I saw his ears turn red. Even in the middle of the game, he still managed to act shy and kilig.

The referee blew the whistle. The opponent immediately performed a jump serve, but unlike before, our setter barely moved from my receive.

I couldn’t help but smile widely, especially when I saw number eleven soaring into the air and smashing the ball with incredible power. And that became the story of the rest of our game. It was so satisfying and exhilarating to finally fulfill one of my dreams:

Me receiving the ball so number eleven could spike it.

"Nice pass, baby," he said to me after finishing the game with a booming spike.

"Nice attack, number eleven," I replied amidst the celebration of the entire team.

Special chapter 3

"Number eleven..."

It’s not the first time I’ve woken up to him, but this guy lying next to me in bed hasn’t budged at all. He’s still fast asleep. He just grunts a little and then falls back into a deep sleep moments later.

He’s even smiling in his sleep, eyes still closed. His guardian angel must be playing with him or something.

"Roen, wake up already," I said in a pretend-angry voice, and it seemed to work because he finally opened one eye.

"Good morning, baby. Happy birthday," he said with his signature smile.

Did he really think that would work? A little.

"My morning’s about to turn bad, and my birthday might not be happy if you don’t get up already."

But this stubborn guy just closed his eyes again! Seriously! "Roen!"

"Who’s that? My name’s not Roen, baby. I’m number eleven."

"So full of yourself!"

"Of course," he smirked and kissed my cheek.

"Roen Alejo!"

"Yes, Kaizen Alejo?"

He even had the audacity to stretch! I felt a bit flustered but didn’t show it because this guy would just tease me more.

"Get up already!"

"Five more minutes," he mumbled groggily.

"You’ve already taken three sets of five minutes. That’s fifteen minutes already."

"Shh. I’m still sleepy, baby."

"We need to get ready. What time is—"

He just grunted again and pulled me closer to him. I tried to wiggle free, but his arms tightened around me. My face ended up buried in his exposed chest. What chance do I have against this guy’s arms?

One arm of his probably equals the size of my thigh.

I could only shake my head at number eleven. How can he not be tired after staying up late talking last night? Look at him now—he’s exhausted, even though I should be the more tired one since I just came from Baguio. I went home to celebrate my birthday early because we had plans. I wanted to spend some quality time with Mom and Tita in Baguio so they wouldn’t feel left out. I wanted to bring number eleven along, but he insisted I bond with them first.

I stayed there for three days and just got back to our condo last night. But my timing was perfect because this was exactly what number eleven planned—a birthday surprise for me.

When I arrived, he was holding a cake, and after I blew out the candles at midnight, number eleven wasted no time. He pounced on me like I was the birthday boy eager to open his gift.

And who am I to resist? I gave in, even though I was tired from traveling… Just kidding! Don't get me wrong—I love our late-night talks too.

"Get up already, number eleven. I told you not to stay up late, didn't I?"

I tapped his chest, but he just hugged me tighter.

Tsk. This disobedient baby.

He probably only let me sleep around 3 AM, so it's a miracle I even woke up to the alarm. But if it were up to me, I'd honestly rather just keep sleeping all day, even though it's my birthday. Unfortunately, we have plans to head to their rest house in Zambales today.

Jerome invited us. He said we'd go to the beach for my birthday. Carlos found out and volunteered the ocean behind number eleven's rest house like he owned the place. And this guy didn't even hesitate to agree, even though he probably wanted to punch his best friend.

"Number eleven..." I called out again, especially since I could feel myself getting sleepy again. Oh no, if I fall back asleep, we're really dead meat with Jerome and Carlos.

"Hmm..."

"Let's get up."

"No..."

"Carlos will kill us if we're late."

"Let him try," he muttered, burying his face into my neck.

And I swear, not even two minutes later, I could already hear his deep breathing. This guy is something else. How does he fall back asleep so quickly? Meanwhile, I need to find the perfect sleeping position just to drift off.

Tsk. Looks like I'll have to say the magic words. He has no intention of waking up.

"Number eleven."

"Hmm..."

"If you get up now, I have a surprise for you in the shower," I whispered in the tone I only use when we're having *those* talks.

I just shook my head because he practically jumped out of bed faster than a rocket. No trace of sleepiness! Wide awake already! Look at him—whenever it's about the shower, he's instantly alert. I should've said that earlier so we could've showered sooner.

"Let's go, baby," he grinned widely.

I was about to respond, but he already dragged me to the bathroom. And sure enough, when we came out of the shower, you'd think number eleven had won the lottery, while my knees were still shaking.

I truly felt sorry for his shampoo and body wash bottles—they're the silent victims whenever *those* talks happen.

"Baby, come here," number eleven called out, now sitting on the bed with a small towel in hand. "I'll dry your hair."

I went over and sat between his spread legs. He was humming a song that sounded familiar, though I didn't know the title. I figured he probably picked it up from TikTok.

While number eleven was busy drying my hair, Carlos called at just the right moment. I immediately put him on speaker mode.

"Hi, birthday boy!" Carlos greeted cheerfully, making me smile. "Good morning! Is Roen awake yet?"

"Yeah. He's already showered too," I replied.

"What a shame. We should've left him behind."

"Asshole," number eleven muttered under his breath, making me laugh.

"Oh, so you're there too!" Carlos laughed loudly. "Hi, dude! We're on our way to your rest house with Jerome. We're in a convoy. See you, lovebirds!"

"Be safe," I said. "Are you driving alone?"

"I'm with Jerome," Carlos answered. "Dude, say hi to the birthday boy."

"Happy birthday, Kai," I heard our team captain's voice, but he sounded a bit upset?

"Thank you, Cap! Who else is with you guys?"

"Just the two of us. The other four are in another car," Carlos replied.

Ugh, looks like the cat and dog are stuck together in one place again!

"Kai, is this how your teammate always is? So dramatic? He didn't even want to ride with me, even though there wasn't enough space in one car? He keeps glaring at me!" Carlos laughed.

I was about to reply when Jerome suddenly cut in.

"Alejo, is this how your best friend always is? So noisy? It's like his mouth was cursed by a chicken's butt. My hair stands on end every time he looks at me!"

And just like that, the two of them started bickering again. Carlos, as usual, was all smiles. He's naturally annoying, and he loves teasing Jerome. His day isn't complete unless he gets Cap riled up.

As for Jerome, he's usually calm, but he gets irritated so easily with Carlos. Whenever they meet, it feels like Jerome is ready to throw punches at number eleven's best friend.

That's why people joke that they should just date already, always fighting like Kiko and his partner.

You'd think they weren't teammates in the pros anymore.

"Just punch him already, Jerome," number eleven chimed in!

I smacked his thigh. He winced and pouted.

"There you two go again. Stop it already. What if you get into an accident..." I scolded them, knocking three times on the wooden desk next to the bed.

I just shook my head and ended the call as the two of them started bickering again. Actually, only Jerome was fuming—Carlos was laughing his head off.

"You know, if those two weren't straight, they could totally be a couple," I said to number eleven.

I looked up at him and saw that he was smirking. I asked what he was smirking about, but he just shook his head and continued drying my hair.

After our little hair-drying session, we got dressed. Number eleven and I ended up looking like twins in our oversized white shirts and black shorts. He even gave me sunglasses since the sun was already high—it was officially summer.

It's so unfair, though. Why is it that when number eleven wears shades, he looks so cool, but when I do, it's like I'm blind?

"Baby," he called out to me once we were finally in the car.

"What?"

"Happy birthday," he said softly.

I smiled. "Thank you."

He unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned over to kiss me. I instinctively placed my hand on his chest, and just like my racing heart, his was beating fast and strong too.

"I love you, baby."

"I love you, number eleven."

"Always?"

"Always."

We just sat there staring at each other, smiling like idiots. It's been years, but the kilig hasn't faded. If anything, it's grown stronger.

Tsk. If it were up to me, we'd just stay here and not leave. Number eleven looks so handsome today that I want to have *another talk* with him. Even though I know I'll just end up exhausted, I can't resist. At the end of the day, I'll still rest in his arms anyway.

Because he's always been my resting place.

And most of the time, he says I'm the same for him.

Boom, I felt kilig all over again.

"Kaaaiiii!"

I laughed as Vince, Kiko, Paul, and Drew greeted us when we got out of the car. We left Manila at 8 AM, but it was almost 2 PM by the time we reached Zambales. Carlos immediately shot us a dirty look because they'd been waiting for two hours.

This guy, number eleven, kept making stopovers. It's obvious he didn't want us to reach our destination.

"Happy birthday, Kai!" the four of them greeted in unison.

"Thank you! I missed you guys!"

"I missed you more, Kai!" Jerome suddenly appeared and hugged me. "Can I ride back with you and Alejo? Screw Carlos—I'm done with that Chinese guy!"

"Hey, what do you mean Chinese? I'm Tsinoy! Half-Chinese!" Carlos chimed in, walking over to us.

"Cap's being such a drama queen! Trying to third-wheel you and Alejo!" Kiko teased, starting the banter.

"Why don't you just give in to Carlos?" Paul joined in, teaming up with Kiko.

"Yeah! He's been courting you, after all!" Vince added, not missing a chance to tease.

"No comment," Drew simply shook his head, refusing to join the chaos.

Carlos burst out laughing while Jerome cursed under his breath, visibly irritated. Number eleven and I just exchanged glances and shook our heads. It seemed like we'd have to endure their teasing for the entire day.

But honestly, it was fun seeing them like this. Ever since we graduated, it's rare for all of us to be together.

Only me, number eleven, Carlos, and Jerome pursued professional volleyball careers. Vince, Kiko, Paul, and Drew chose to focus on the degrees they completed.

Carlos and Jerome are now teammates. I still remember how Cap reacted when he found out Carlos transferred to his team. He almost breached his contract just to avoid him.

Number eleven and I should've been teammates too. We were recruited by the same team, but I didn't sign with them. I went to another team because I didn't want him as my teammate.

I was fine being teammates with him in the national team, though. I realized I actually prefer blocking his spikes—it's more satisfying as a libero.

Plus, I missed wearing my jersey number.

There's something about having number eleven on my jersey that feels special. I remember how number eleven even tried to bargain with me, offering to wear jersey number 27 instead, but I refused. I wanted both of us to wear number eleven, so I signed with a different team.

And oh, did he throw a fit about it.

I had to comfort him for almost a week!

I thought he was going to beat me with a stick or something.

Luckily, I managed to calm him down with some good conversation. But this time, we really talked—like, actual words, not just body language.

Still, there are times when he gets upset during training days because we go to different gyms. What I usually do is show him TikTok edits fans make of us, and then he’s fine again.

Roen’s happiness really is simple, isn’t it?

What annoys me, though, is how he gets revenge during actual games when our teams face each other. He deliberately avoids spiking toward me, so I can’t block him!

But yeah, I’m happy for us and for our friends. We’re thriving in our chosen careers, and I’m so proud of all of them. One of my wishes for my birthday this year is for all of us to become even more successful.

Response? Amen!

"Let’s eat already! I’ve been starving since earlier!" Kiko exclaimed, leading the way.

"It’s because Kai and Alejo took so long to get here," Paul teased, smirking at me. "They were probably having some *quality time*."

"You should find yourself a partner too," I shot back, pulling number eleven along. "Come on! Let’s go! Let’s swim already—I’m dying to hit the water!"

Jerome chimed in, "Ocean vibes!"

"Ocean vibes? I thought you were all about Carlos now, Cap?" Vince teased, running away from Jerome.

We all burst out laughing, except for Jerome, who was turning red—not from kilig, but from anger and frustration.

Behind the rest house of number eleven, everything was already set up near the beach. When we arrived, I was stunned by the amount of food on the table. It was a boodle fight setup, and there were tons of mangoes, which I was sure came from number eleven’s mango farm.

But honestly, I was more excited about the ocean.

Wow, when was the last time I came here? It’s been so long. Number eleven and I have been so busy, especially since we just finished the conference season.

We’ve had plenty of plans to go somewhere, but none of them panned out—we were either too lazy or too busy.

"Let’s take a picture," I suggested.

"Picture time, Kai said!" Kiko announced. "Whoever has the longest arm should hold the camera."

"Take a picture! So Roen can post it on his TikTok account," Carlos joked.

They were all messing around, but number eleven and I were already ready for the photo. He wrapped his arms around me from behind, resting his head on my shoulder.

"Damn, this is how you take pictures," Vince commented, noticing us. "By pairs!"

Number eleven and I laughed. These guys are crazy!

"Carlos, hug your captain!"

"Damn you all, will you ever stop?!"

"Jerome, come to daddy!" Carlos egged him on.

"Damn you! You're no better!"

As they say, no matter how much teasing and joking goes on, the photoshoot always happens in the end.

After we ate, we rested for a bit before deciding to play beach volleyball. Naturally, number eleven and I were on the same team, and our opponents were Carlos and Jerome.

I couldn't stop laughing every time the ball went to Jerome—he'd spike it straight at Carlos. Of course, Carlos wouldn't back down either. He targeted Jerome's face.

You can probably guess who won the game.

When we got tired, the four of them took over. They were thrilled because they said it had been a while since they last touched a volleyball. And of course, we teased Kiko endlessly because he couldn't spike anymore.

Once we were done with beach volleyball, we all headed straight for the ocean.

When 6 PM rolled around, they decided to start a bonfire. They sang *Happy Birthday* to me again, and I was surprised when number eleven suddenly appeared with a cake.

"Make a wish, Kai," they all said.

I smiled and closed my eyes.

"Good health, more blessings, and long life for us and for everyone we love in life."

Then I opened my eyes to blow out the candles.

I didn't even know why they clapped afterward. They're such a rowdy bunch.

That's how the night went—deep conversations, teasing, laughter, and singing while Carlos played the guitar, until it eventually led to an endless game of *spin the bottle*, followed by *truth or dare* for whoever the bottle pointed to.

Wow, such a "new" game.

"This game is so flirtatious, Kiko," Paul complained.

"What, were we supposed to play tag or something? It's nighttime already!"

We all burst out laughing at that.

"Alright, let's start! I'll go first!" Vince said as he spun the bottle.

And it landed on me!

I suddenly got nervous. I know these guys—they're full of nonsense.

"Kai, you know the drill."

"Truth," I said, because I didn't trust what they'd make me do for a dare. "Who was the first to confess between you and Alejo?"

I immediately started thinking hard while they stared at me. I noticed Kiko and Paul grinning. I laughed because nothing had even happened yet, but those fools were already getting kilig. They're worse than me.

I glanced at number eleven, who was also watching me. Oh no, I'm sure his head will explode with my answer.

"Me," I answered, and the crazy ones erupted in cheers.

"I'm getting kilig, damn it!" Kiko exclaimed, making me laugh. "When exactly did that happen, Kai?"

"Uh, the day I got my ACL injury in college? Do you remember that?"

They cheered again, and number eleven smirked proudly. Wow, you'd think he wasn't the one who made the first move after giving me that facial hit. I even asked him later if it was intentional, but he swore it wasn't.

"But who fell in love first?"

"No follow-up questions," number eleven suddenly interjected.

Carlos burst out laughing and pointed at his best friend, causing the eggs to go wild again. I laughed even harder when number eleven started glaring daggers at his best friend.

"But you're something else, Kai! Even injured and everything, you still managed to confess—and in front of so many people, too!" Jerome teased.

"I remember that! Too bad we didn't hear it! We were pulled away from you right after, but Alejo was the only one who got close," Kiko added, looking genuinely regretful. "It was like Flash—he got there faster than Coach. But that was it!"

"Was it a life-and-death situation, Kai?" Vince chimed in, acting overly dramatic. "So that's how you confess to your crush. Noted, noted," he and Drew nodded exaggeratedly.

"If I hadn't confessed then, this guy probably wouldn't have either," I said, glancing at the big baby beside me who was now scowling.

"Kai, you just called Roen shy," Carlos teased, thrilled that his best friend was the topic of conversation.

I laughed, expecting my former teammates to jump in and tease number eleven further, but no one dared. How could they, when his glare alone could kill? He looked ready to punch someone.

"My turn to spin," I said, spinning the bottle.

It landed on Kiko, who immediately chose dare. I dared him to give Paul a lap dance, and that might have been the most horrifying scene I've ever witnessed. Parental guidance was definitely needed.

Number eleven even covered my eyes.

"Damn it, who's going to ask, 'What is love?' You guys pick truth, okay?" Kiko laughed as he spun the bottle again, dancing to the steps of TWICE's *"What is Love?"*

"What the hell, Kiko! Your questions are so corny!" Paul grimaced. "What is love? Is this a diary entry?"

"What diary? That's a slam book," Drew corrected. "Wait, is that outdated now?"
We all burst out laughing. Such a chaotic group.

"Looks like no one filled out your slam book in high school, huh?" Jerome teased.

"You idiots. I was just checking if you're still awake."

"Alright, Paul, keep up the stupidity."

Then we all clapped when the bottle finally stopped—and it pointed to Carlos. We all immediately looked at him, and he was already smirking. Then it shifted to Jerome, who went from smirking to frowning instantly.

"Behave yourself, idiot," Cap threatened Kiko.

"Cap, not yet! Are you excited for Carlos to kiss you?"

"Cap, it's not your turn yet. You'll get to kiss Carlos too."

We all burst out laughing, especially when Jerome threw sand at the evil twins—Kiko and Paul.

"Back to the game! Carlos, you know the drill. Truth or dare?"

"Dare."

"Kiss Kai."

"What the fuck?" Number eleven immediately sat up and glared at Carlos.

We all burst out laughing again, and I had to pull number eleven to calm him down. Damn Kiko.

"What the hell, dude? Why are you glaring at me? Did I give the order?" Carlos defended himself, ready for his best friend's punch.

"Just a joke, Alejo! Calm down!" Kiko quickly said, looking genuinely scared of the guy next to me. "Alright, alright, Carlos. Due to insistent public demand, kiss Captain Jerome instead!"

"Kiss and hug!" Paul and Kiko added.

"Damn you all! Can't you just—"

And we all froze when Carlos quickly kissed Jerome on the cheek.

There was a moment of silence before it sank in what had just happened. By the time it did, I saw Paul choking Kiko, who was screaming. Vince almost fell into the bonfire. Drew covered his face. Number eleven hugged me tightly, burying his face in my neck while laughing. Me, mouth agape, openly kilig. And Jerome, ready to murder the still-smiling Carlos.

And that was the story of our night until we all got tired and sleepy. Those fools—even until bedtime, they didn't stop being annoying. They squeezed into our room with number eleven and slept there, even though there were cleaned rooms prepared for them.

So, we left poor baby outside to cool off by the shore.

"Finally," number eleven said, hugging me from behind. We sat on a blanket he laid out on the sand. "Some peace and quiet."

I laughed. "They’re so annoying, aren’t they?"

"Yeah. I want to throw them into the sea."

"You’re such a brat," I teased, lightly tapping his arm. Silence.

But this is my favorite kind of silence in the world because it’s the most peaceful for me.

I don’t know how many minutes passed without either of us speaking, but it still felt comfortable. That’s how it always is when you’re with the person you love.

Everything felt so peaceful.

The warm April breeze began to blow gently, accompanied by the relaxing sound of the waves. When I looked up at the sky, I saw how bright the moon was and how countless the stars were. Wow, what a beautiful night.

After a while, I felt number eleven tighten his embrace around me, so I let myself lean back against his chest.

"Happy birthday, baby."

"Thank you."

"Did you have fun today?"

"Yes," I replied, closing my eyes as I felt his lips kissing my shoulder… my neck… until they reached behind my ear.

"Let’s talk?" he whispered, his voice hoarse.

He even used his bedroom voice!

I just laughed. Here we go again with his *let’s talk*. But who am I to refuse, right? I was about to speak when I suddenly felt something cold slide onto my… ring finger.

My heart started racing. I slowly looked down, and when I saw it shimmering under the moonlight, my vision blurred with tears.

Shit… I told myself I wouldn’t cry on my birthday…

"My birthday gift for you," number eleven said softly. "Do you like it?"

I turned to look at him, but I couldn’t say anything—I was overwhelmed with happiness. I just nodded and quickly kissed him on the lips.

I love you, Roen. Always.

Side story C x J part 1

"Cute, Kaizen, but you're not my type. No offense meant," I said to my beloved best friend, Roen, the so-called *'lover boy'* Alejo.

We may be best friends, but our tastes in crushes are completely different. Roen's into fair-skinned guys like Kai—guys he can baby around, whose hair bounces like Kai's, who plays libero like Kai, and who wears jersey number eleven, just like Kai. In short, Kai has always been his type, even back then. There's nothing we can do about it.

The guy is head over heels for his baby Kai.

As for me, my preferences are pretty simple.

Let's see… I like morenos. Broad shoulders and a well-built chest. Someone with a brooding look, but when he smiles, his eyes twinkle. A student-athlete. The setter and team captain of Creston University's men's volleyball team. Kai's teammate. Wearing jersey number twelve.

The one on the court right now, playing against my school. Roen probably won't mind if I cheer for Creston this time, right? But wait, honestly, I don't really care if my teammates get mad.

Sorry, guys. Crush first, school pride later.

Above all, my type is someone named Jerome Christopher Lorenzo.

Long name, huh? Makes my name, Carlos Yu, feel so plain. I bet he used to cry over his name back in kindergarten because it wouldn't fit on paper whenever he had to write it down.

He should be thankful that he only needs to add two letters to his last name. But honestly, I wouldn't mind if he added his last name to mine. Just that "Lorenzo" doesn't really suit me since I'm Chinese. Well, we'll figure that out at the right time. As Kai says, we need to manifest these things.

But yeah, those are my preferences. Not too specific, right?

"You like Kai's teammate?" Roen asked, surprised, when I told him.

"Yes," I replied, and after scrolling through Jerome's Instagram profile, I turned to my best friend. I gave him a look. "Are you saying Jerome's your crush too? You already have Kaizen."

"What the fuck?" He moved away from me on my dorm bed. "Since when?"

"Uh, since our rookie year?"

"What?!" Roen can be such a drama queen sometimes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I just shrugged and laughed. Roen kept staring at me, but I ignored him and went back to scrolling through Jerome's profile. Tsk. Doesn't he ever post anything new? Even just a picture of his chest would make me happy. I've already memorized all his pictures here—I've liked every single one of them. It's frustrating that he hasn't followed me back yet.

He should've followed me back by now, even if he doesn't know me yet. Isn't that how it works? Doesn't he know the rules?

I even made sure my profile looked good. I changed my profile picture too—I posted a topless photo so he'd immediately notice my abs. I waited for a follow-back and a heart react, but nothing. My teammates even told me I was out of luck.

You should really be grateful, Lorenzo. I'm absolutely crushing on you.

"So… you're gay?" Roen asked again after staring at me for a while.

"Yeah," I smiled at him. "Just like you. We really are best friends. Both gay. Come give me a kiss—"

But he quickly moved away. "Fuck off, Yu. Only Kai can kiss me."

I burst out laughing and opened YouTube to search for whip sound effects. This guy is so whipped!

"Only Kai? What about your mom?" I teased, referring to his mommy.

"That's different," he answered, and I just shook my head.

"Why don't you confess first? How will Kai kiss you if you don't admit your feelings?"

He shot me a glare. "I will!" But I just smirked. "Why do I feel like Kai might confess to you first?"

He froze. "Do you think he likes me too?"

"With how slow you are, I think he's already given up on you. Give up, dude."

"Shut the hell up!"

We started hitting each other with pillows. It's so fun to tease this guy—he looks so calm and collected most of the time, but when it comes to his baby Kai, all his emotions come rushing out.

"But seriously, are you really gay?" he asked again after we got tired of pillow-fighting.

"Yeah. I'd even kiss you if you wanted. Lips to lips. But no ulterior motives! Just a bestfriend kind of kiss. And I won't tell Kai—"

I was cut off when he threw a pillow at me. Success! The future baby daddy of Kaizen is so mad!

"Does he know?"

"Who? Jerome? That I like him?"

Roen rolled his eyes. So sassy! "Who else, idiot?"

I laughed and turned my attention back to Jerome's picture.

I suddenly remembered the first time I saw him. It was also the first time I played against him on the court. I've known for a long time that I'm not straight—I figured it out back in grade four.

Growing up, though, I didn't tell anyone. Closeted, as they say. But eventually, I couldn't keep it in anymore. I told my mom on the day of my high school graduation, and thank God, she's the most supportive and coolest mom ever. I also told my older brother, and he's cool with it too. He just told me to be responsible. As for my dad, well, he's already in heaven now. But I'm sure that if he were still alive, he'd support me too.

Roen was the only one I hadn't told until our sophomore year. It wasn't fair to him because he actually came out to me first, even though I think I became gay before him.

And so, to make things fair between us since we're best friends, I decided to tell him. I trust Roen. He keeps quiet about it unless we're talking about Kaizen.

Aside from my immediate family and Roen, I haven't told anyone else. Why? First, I don't owe anyone an explanation about my gender identity. Second, I'll come out when I want to, not when others want me to.

But if someone respectfully asks if I'm part of the rainbow community, I'll answer proudly. Loud and proud.

I used to think I was bisexual because I still found girls attractive and some guys interesting.

But the moment I laid eyes on Jerome, I knew right then and there that he was the one. Wow! But kidding aside, I felt an instant connection with him.

His appeal hits hard, especially since I'm into morenos.

And not just any moreno—he's the type who glows under the sunlight. Brooding because of his eyebrows. And that's the problem. There's something about brooding guys that makes me weak. What the hell, right? But that's just how it is—everyone has their preferences.

But there's another problem. Jerome is straight. A moment of silence, please, for my broken heart.

Yep, unfortunately, he's straight.

If he weren't, maybe the two of us could've been the ones sharing the split screen in the arena during games, not just Roen and Kaizen.

Tsk.

The general rule is, you can't assume someone's gender unless they tell you themselves.

But people say that anything is possible these days.

On the other hand, I don't think it's right to be the reason someone experiences an identity crisis.

So, I followed the general rule and stuck to what I said. I ignored what *they*—whoever they are—said.

Another thing… I'm shy too. Look at me and Roen. Both gay, both shy. What a great combination.

Actually, I'm a straightforward person. But maybe there are cases where you can't say what you want to say right away. Like with Jerome. Wow. He's the only exception!

Jerome was part of our batch, and even back when we were rookies, I already liked him. But since he's straight—and I'm too chicken to confess in case he's actually gay—I kept my feelings to myself. I turned him into my happy crush instead. Sounds corny, right? But whatever. I was content with feeling kilig every time our teams faced off and whenever I stalked his Instagram.

That was my plan all along. Just a glance at Jerome. Just admiring him from afar. I was really okay with it because, honestly, I had no chance. As long as I didn't hear about him having a girlfriend, I was fine. All I hoped for was that I'd find a partner before he did because it would really hurt if he found someone he liked and it wasn't me.

But it seemed Lady Luck smiled at me because the following year, I found out that Roen, our rookie libero Jerome's teammate, Kaizen, was actually the one Roen liked.

I felt so relieved!

Finally, I had some sort of connection with my sweet love, Jerome!

But I almost hit myself when I ended up introducing myself to Kaizen instead of Jerome! I must've looked like I had a thing for Roen's baby! Good thing no one watched that live, or I'd have been erased from existence without even confessing to Jerome.

"Who's that?" I heard him ask Kaizen.

Well, what the fuck, Carlos. Look!

He asked who you were!

He was curious about you!

So I spent hours regretting how Roen's clumsiness rubbed off on me. Damn it, I should've just grabbed his hand! I imagined it would be rough... but who cares! My hands are soft, so we'd still match!

But it was also kind of sad… because it seemed like he didn't know me?

We always faced each other at the net, and yet he didn't recognize me, not even by my face? Meanwhile, I already knew exactly where every single mole on his face was located! We were in the same batch, hello?! So that made me even more convinced that he was straighter than straight.

What they said—those people—was wrong. Not everything can be bent. My crush is a ruler. He won't become a protractor.

And that's how my story with Jerome went. It couldn't even be called a love story because only I had feelings for him—it was just a story.

Heartbreaking.

I even looked like an idiot sometimes because I'd watch Creston's games live just to catch a glimpse of him. No shame at all. I think the ticket seller at the arena already recognized me because I never missed any of their games. I didn't tell Roen because I preferred a peaceful viewing experience from my favorite spot.

And I thought that was the end of my journey with Papa Jerome.

Thankfully, it wasn't time for Roen to leave the world yet. The guy celebrated his birthday. He was so happy, of course, because he got to celebrate with his baby Kai. They planned a trip to La Union. Though I wasn't sure if he was as happy to have me join his celebration.

Well, I didn't come along just to give them alone time as lovebirds. Sometimes it was just envy. At least Roen had a love life. Me? Still single, relying on my own hand for happiness… you know.

But when I heard from Kai that Jerome and some of their other teammates were coming too, I didn't hesitate anymore.

Tell me, what right did I have not to join when the person I've liked for three years was going to be there with us?

He needed to know about my existence and my feelings!

"Carlos, this good-natured but secretly mischievous guy is Vince. These two who aren't twins but share the same knack for mischief are Kiko and Paul. And this genuinely good boy is Drew. And of course," Kai pointed to the brooding face. "Our team captain. He's nice too. I don't have anything bad to say about him. Jerome."

I already knew his name, Kai. I've known it for a long time.

I even knew the names of his second cousins.

"Guys, this is Carlos. Best friend of number eleven. Opposite hitter for Westmore."

I shook hands with Kai's four teammates. I deliberately paid attention to the moreno standing to the side, smirking at me. I tried to act cool so he wouldn't notice how head over heels I was for him.

But damn, that smirk…

I wanted to take him home and serve him.

Stop smirking at me, babe. Please. That's my weakness… but your chest is still number one.

I could already see it through the polo he was wearing. Moreno skin really is beautiful. Tsk. Why does he have to expose it like that, Jerome? If only he buttoned it up… or maybe I could do it for him?

"Nice to meet you," he said when it was finally my turn to shake his hand. And I was wrong about thinking his hands would be rough. I forgot he was a setter. His hands were so soft! Even softer than mine! I felt embarrassed.

"Same here," I replied, trying to sound cool.

Same here?! What kind of response was that, Carlos? So lame, dude!

And this guy Roen beside me wasn't helping—he was barely holding back his laughter! I subtly kicked him under the table. This fucker! He probably wanted me to embarrass myself even more!

And if I thought Jerome and I would get closer that day, I was dead wrong. After we were introduced, he didn't even look at me again! Not once!

I tried so many times to get his attention. I joined their conversations. I cracked jokes. I showed off. I even took off my shirt and flexed my muscles casually—but what? Nothing! Zero reaction! What a failure!

Even Roen noticed what I was doing. Several times, he caught me in the act and laughed like an animal. Tsk. I was losing my confidence with Jerome. He was different. Numb! Completely numb!

That's when I realized that if I wanted him to notice me, I needed to take action. Screw it if he got mad or punched me. The important thing was that I confessed.

What happened to your "don't be the reason someone has an identity crisis," Carlos?

Well, desperate times call for desperate measures.

Besides, I wasn't forcing my feelings on him. I was just informing him. That's all I planned to do. If he really was straight, then fine! Straight it is! There's nothing I can do about it. It hurts, yes, but I'd have no choice but to move on.

What if you could bend the ruler?

Well… wait. I suddenly felt kilig at the thought.

Ah, whatever! I'm confessing no matter what!

Luckily, there came a moment when only Jerome and I were left at the table. Roen, Kai, and their teammates were already in the water, while Jerome stayed behind because he planned to swim later. So here I was, staying behind too.

I cleared my throat, and he glanced at me. But only for a fleeting moment—did he just undress me with his eyes, Jerome? Fine with me. I wouldn't resist. I'd even help him.

I cleared my throat again and casually took a sip from my glass of sparkling water.

I thought for a moment about a topic I could use to lead into my confession.

Until I saw my best friend and his baby being all sweet together.

"Kai and Roen are so sweet, huh?" I started.

Jerome and I exchanged glances. At that moment, I wanted to throw a tantrum. He looked at me! I could've gone back to the hotel and slept soundly.

"Yeah," he replied.

Such a brief answer.

"Do you want something like that too?"

He looked at me again, and I pretended to be chill. Inside, I wanted to applaud myself for how smooth that sounded. Maybe it was the sparkling water talking. But I also felt like peeing from nervousness because this was it—I was about to confess.

"Huh?"

"I can do that too."

"Are you drunk?"

I laughed. But honestly, whatever words came out of his mouth, I'd probably laugh just to please him. Especially now. I hadn't even touched alcohol, but I was bold enough to confess. Imagine if I were actually drunk!

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I saw him frown slightly and purse his lips. And that was it.

I could feel my heart pounding hard and fast since earlier, but I ignored it.

Tsk. His lips were so red. So tempting.

Oh, what I'd do just to kiss those lips of his.

"No," he answered. Brief again.

How about a boyfriend?

But I didn’t ask. If (emphasis on *if*) he really was straight, chances were he didn’t have a boyfriend.

I couldn’t bring myself to fully rejoice, though. Sure, he didn’t have a girlfriend, but that didn’t guarantee he was looking for a boyfriend.

But focus on the goal, Carlos. You’re just confessing. It doesn’t mean you’ll end up together tonight after you confess.

"Me neither. I don’t have one," I said, searching for the right timing.

"Why?"

Aha, he asked! Curious?

I smirked. Because I wasn’t looking for a girlfriend. It’s you, Jerome. You’re the one I want.

"I don’t do girlfriends."

"Ah," he nodded. "One-night stands only, huh?"

I almost closed my eyes. What the hell. He misunderstood me! Tsk. I was looking for the perfect moment, and this is what popped into his mind. Shit, this wasn’t going well.

"No," I replied, then looked directly into his eyes. "I… don’t like girls."

His lips parted, and I almost got distracted again. Focus, Los! You’ll taste those lips if you play your cards right and if luck is on your side!

"Uhm…" he didn’t know what to say. Was he cute when flustered?

But I didn’t dwell on that. This was it. I was finally telling him how I felt.

"I don’t like other boys either," I added slowly, emphasizing the word *other*. "I only like you, Jerome."

There.

I said it.

I finally confessed.

We stared at each other. His lips were slightly parted, and he didn’t speak right away. It was quiet between us, and I think he could hear the sound of the waves during those moments. But me? I couldn’t hear anything except the loud beating of my heart.

The only problem was… I watched as confusion turned into anger on Jerome’s face.

Well, I expected he might react this way, didn’t I?

But… shit. It felt like my heart was being squeezed.

"That’s not a funny joke," he answered seriously.
"Am I looking like I’m joking?" I said even more seriously.

We stared at each other then. I was the first to break eye contact because I couldn’t handle how serious his eyes were. I felt weak. And slowly, hope started slipping away.

I already saw this coming, but still…

"Damn," he said, laughing after a few seconds of silence. He turned to look at the sea. "It’s fine, bro. You almost had me convinced—"

"I told you, I’m not joking. I really like you, Jerome."

He froze, and we locked eyes again. There it was again—those serious eyes of his. I hoped he’d finally take what I said seriously.

"You’re not?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Damn… are you gay?"

"Yes. Very much so for you."

I was surprised when he suddenly stood up. His glare was full of anger, but for some reason, I wasn’t scared. Maybe I was going crazy, but instead of feeling intimidated, I found him even hotter, especially now that I could see his chest again. It looked so touchable, so warm.

"Damn you! We barely know each other, and this is the kind of joke you pull? Let’s just fight!"

"I’ll let you punch me, but only if I get to kiss you afterward. Deal?"

"Are you not going to stop?!"

"Why should I stop liking you—"

"You idiot!"

I laughed as he stormed off. I watched him walk back to his teammates. He glanced back at me once, glaring, so I smirked and winked at him.

I didn’t know if I was just carried away by my emotions or if I was deluding myself… but I felt a flicker of hope when I saw anger in his eyes.

There was no disgust.
No judgment.

Just a mix of shock and anger, probably because, from his perspective, we barely knew each other—we’d only met a few hours ago. But how about you, Jerome? From my perspective, we’ve been boyfriends for a long time.

That’s what I held onto.

After that epic confession, I launched Operation: Seduce Jerome.

I started messaging him on IG until he noticed me—or maybe on his other social media accounts. He’s the one to blame, though, because he could’ve blocked me but didn’t. That’s why I kept getting delusional.

And whenever our paths crossed, I always teased him. I loved seeing him get flustered and annoyed. That's when I discovered how fun it was to mess with him! His reactions were so cute—he didn't know whether to run away from me or punch me. Well, I wouldn't mind if he punched me. As long as it was him throwing the punch, no problem.

Even if he tied me up. Even if he called me *master* a hundred times.

But it would've been better if I could call him *baby*.

Tsk. I used to say I wouldn't end up like Roen, who's head over heels for his baby. But look at me now. My imagination and delusions about my own baby have gone wild. And we're supposed to be best friends!

That's how things went between me and Jerome until we graduated. Me annoying him, and him almost ready to punch me. But none of that bothered me. I kept telling myself, that's just his love language. Wow!

Some people might think I wasn't making any progress. But as I said, Jerome himself should be the one to tell me to stop—that he doesn't like me because he's straight and will never change. When that moment comes, I'll stop. I can take a hint… sometimes. I'll try, but I'm not sure.

But how can I stop? Every time I see him, I fall harder and harder.

Isn't that unfair? I'm head over heels for him, but he's not. He should be catching me, right? I'm falling, and he's just watching me crash into him? That shouldn't be allowed.

And in the middle of all my teasing, I still reminded myself not to get my hopes up too high. Not to expect too much. That it was okay if this was all we'd ever be. That this was as far as we'd go. Like Kai said, we're like cats and dogs. Sometimes, I even convinced myself that this setup was enough for me—that loving him and being happy whenever he talked to me (even if most of the time he was practically stabbing me) was enough.

Wow, right? Even I didn't expect to become this way when it came to him.

Content with whatever he could give me.

Just to somehow satisfy my feelings.

In my mind, he was the grumpy boyfriend who was always mad at the world and dragged me into his mood swings. And I was the super patient boyfriend who put up with it all. Wow!

And just when I thought things would stay this way, fate smiled at me. Destiny was truly on my side. Because of this, I found out that the opposite spiker on Jerome's pro team had retired. Coincidentally, my contract with my team had also ended. They wanted to renew it, but I decided to try out for Jerome's team so I could finally experience being his teammate.

And there it was! Finally! Jerome and I were teammates!

Look at that! I'd finally get to see him in training shirts and shorts!

I'll never forget how he looked when I was introduced to the whole team. Kai even told me that Jerome almost terminated his contract when he heard I was joining. Tsk. Such a drama king! If I know him, he was secretly thrilled because we'd get to see each other every day during training.

Just thinking about him setting the ball for me made me kilig.

I already had plans for the next conference. After training, I'd ask him to hang out. We'd grab food—a friendly date for him, but a date with ulterior motives for me. Then I'd drop him off at his condo. Simple things, but they meant so much to me because I'd get to spend time with him… bond with him.

"What are you doing here?"

I smiled at Jerome as I rolled down the window of my car. I was parked right outside the condo building where he lived. It was Kai's birthday today, and we were celebrating at Roen's rest house in Zambales.

But first, look at my baby. Early in the morning, and he was already giving me attitude. That's just how much he loves me—he hides his kilig with anger.

"Good morning!" I greeted him.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated, glaring at me. He didn't even say good morning back!

"Why are you here? Where are Kiko and the others?"

"You're riding with me—"

"No way! I'm riding with Kiko! Leave already!"

I laughed at how cute he was. My baby was angry again. Thankfully, I'm nice. We really are a match made in heaven.

I got out of the car and walked over to him. He looked so hot in his short-sleeved polo and shorts. He was carrying a big backpack that looked heavy, so I tried to take it from him, but he quickly pulled it away.

"Who said I'm riding with you?"

"Me," I smirked.

"Damn you."

"I love you too."

He raised his fist as if to punch me, but I just closed my eyes and waited for the blow. But it never came.

When I opened my eyes, I saw him fuming, practically throwing a tantrum while scrolling through his phone. He was probably going to call Kiko. But they wouldn't answer—he'd already been warned by me. So I just watched him curse under his breath while seething with anger.

"You won't all fit in Kiko's car. You have no choice but to come with me. Let's go," I said softly, but what else could he do? He just glared at me again. His eyes looked like they were about to shoot lasers. My scary baby!

"I'm not coming anymore," he replied. "Tell those four eggs to prepare for me!"

I laughed. He really can be so dramatic sometimes.

"You're in trouble with Kai if you don't come."

"I'll just walk there."

"Your feet will hurt."

"You don’t care."

"Alright then. If you’re walking, better get started."

Again, he raised his fist to punch me, but this time I grabbed his hand. Quickly, I took his backpack and headed to the back of my car to put it there. And while doing that, I still held onto his other hand.

I smiled. What soap does he use? His hands are so soft.

And too bad—because he noticed we were holding hands. He pulled his hand away and hit me on the shoulder. I winced in pain. What the hell? A setter, but punches like a spiker!

"Smile. It’s Kai’s birthday, and here you are sulking?" I said, but he just glared at me before getting into the passenger seat. I laughed again. He’s coming anyway, right? Sometimes I really wonder why I fell for Jerome, who seems to have been born with a talent for being hard to get.

If only he loved me already, we’d all be happy now, wouldn’t we?

Tsk.

"Do you want coffee? Let’s grab some from the drive-thru," I suggested as we were on the road. Kiko and the others were following us, and we almost got hit because Jerome was fuming again when he saw the four of them behind us.

"No. My stomach will hurt. I haven’t had breakfast yet," he snapped, looking out the window.

"Why haven’t you eaten yet?"

"I just didn’t feel like it."

"You should eat in the morning. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, you know?" I said, but he didn’t respond. Stubborn! "There’s a sandwich in the backseat. In the thermal bag. Go ahead and take it."

"I don’t want to eat—"

"You haven’t eaten either."

He turned to look at me. I glanced at him briefly, smiled, and returned my gaze to the road.

"Come on," I said gently. "Let’s eat. We still have a long drive ahead of us."

And damn, my cheeks almost burst when he actually listened to me. Wow. This is one thing I’ve noticed about him—he softens during gentle conversations.

"Here," he said, handing me a sandwich. "You’re driving. Just feed me—"

"Idiot! Don’t act like you don’t have hands. Take this!"

I pouted and let it go. My kilig lasted only a few seconds. He finished it quickly. Damn. I could already see our future. I’d be beneath him. It’s fine, but I’d also like some affection sometimes. This guy, Jerome, doesn’t understand feelings at all.

He should be thankful I love him.

"Do you want music?" I asked.

"Up to you. It’s your car."

"Radio?" I suggested, and he just shrugged.

But when I turned it on, *This Guy's In Love With You Pare* by Parokya ni Edgar was playing!

I burst out laughing, and Jerome and I almost ended up wrestling. He wanted to change the station, but I stopped him. In the end, I let it play because we might get into an accident. Of course, I had to be careful driving, especially since he was with me.

"Let’s call Kai," I said after settling on his playlist instead. I wanted to complain because it was all sad songs, but he might actually punch me for real.

I greeted Kai when he answered, teasing Roen as usual. Those two sounded like they’d just woken up. They must’ve slept well last night, huh?

"I’m with Jerome," I told Kai when he asked if I was driving alone. I glanced at the guy next to me, whose forehead was furrowed so deeply. "Dude," I called him, though he should really be called *baby*. Soon, Carlos, soon. "Say hello to the birthday boy."

He shot me a glare, but I just smiled. Stubborn! But at least he’s only stubborn with me.

"Happy birthday, Kai," he said unenthusiastically, making me laugh.

"Thank you, cap! Who else is with you there?"

"Just the two of us. The four of them are in the other car," I answered.

We eventually made it to Zambales without me getting beaten up by Jerome. But he ignored me afterward, especially when Kai and Roen arrived. Sometimes I even asked Kiko to tease us, but it only made him angrier. But that just made me want to tease him more because doesn’t he realize how hot he looks to me when he’s mad?

And since he couldn’t punch me for real, my baby got his revenge during beach volleyball. My face was his target every time he spiked! Did he think I wouldn’t retaliate? I’ll just make him angrier because he’s so cute when he’s mad.

"Due to insistent public demand, kiss Captain Jerome!" Kiko commanded when the bottle pointed at me.

And once again, I saw a new opportunity to tease Jerome! And of course, an opportunity to kiss him.

And success! I think he really might kill me after I stole a kiss from him. Do I regret it, even if he punches me for real? No. Did I get kilig? Hell yes! I felt like I could die in that moment. But I quickly snapped out of it. I can’t die yet because Jerome and I aren’t officially *us* yet.

Overall, it was a great day. It was fun because it was Kai’s birthday. It was fun because we were all together. And it was especially joyful because I could see Jerome having fun too.

"They look sweet together, don’t they?"

That’s what I said when I found him on the balcony of Roen’s rest house. He looked like he couldn’t sleep. It was deep into the night. I had already dozed off, but for some reason, I suddenly woke up, and the first thing my eyes searched for was Jerome. And there he was, watching our two friends down by the shore… kissing.

Tsk. Disrespectful to us singles.
But as I asked Jerome that question, I suddenly remembered the night I confessed to him back in La Union. And that's when I realized it had already been years since then.

Damn, so I've loved Jerome for over five years already? I hadn't really counted. Whenever I'm with him, I barely notice anything around me. My focus is always on him, even though his goal is often to punch me.

I feel like I deserve a medal. It's been a long time since I started liking him.

And until now, he's still the one.

No one else.

"Yeah," he replied briefly. I laughed because that was exactly how he responded to me back then. Seriously… after all these years, neither of us has improved.

But as I said, right? I'm already happy with how things are between us.

I'm happy loving him.

I glanced at his hands resting on the railing. I've always dreamed of holding them. And I wanted to hold them right now. Would he get mad if I… worked up the courage to hold them?

Well, he'd definitely get mad. But oh well, if he gets mad, so be it. As long as I get to hold his hand.

Tsk. It's all Roen's fault, really. They're so lovey-dovey under the moonlight! Suddenly, I felt inspired to flirt with Jerome.

I turned to him, ready to start my plan to seduce him. But I froze when I caught him gazing up at the sky. My lips parted when I saw how peaceful his face looked. His forehead wasn't furrowed. His eyes, reflecting the bright moon, looked so calm. Accompanied by the sound of the ocean waves as background music.

Shit… what a view.

I cleared my throat. Damn, this guy really knows how to ruin someone's cool.

But… tsk. He's so easy to flirt with right now. Maybe it's because of the moon. Or maybe it's the waves. Or the cool breeze. Or the peacefulness of the night…

Or maybe… it's because my heart is beating so loud and fast right now.

"Do you want… that too?"

Out of all the things I could've said, that's what came out of my mouth. Maybe I was carried away, trying to mimic what I said when I first confessed to him.

We locked eyes.

And suddenly, I felt weak when he smiled… and slowly moved closer to me.

"I do," he said. "You can give me that, right?"

I swallowed hard. Well… what the hell.

Side story C x J part 2

"Do you want… that too?"

From watching Kai and Roen down by the shore, I shifted my gaze to Carlos. His lips were slightly parted, clearly nervous. I wanted to laugh at how ridiculous he looked right now, but instead, I just smiled. Despite my heart pounding so hard, I slowly moved closer to him.

This was the second time he'd asked me that outrageous question. The first time, I didn't immediately understand it—because who in their right mind would ask something like that, right? Only him. Only Carlos Yu.

And now that he's asking again, I already have an answer for him.

But look at this fool.

Did he think that stealing a kiss from me earlier would make him look all pitiful like a lost kitten now? He looks so awkward, like he doesn't know what to do!

What's wrong, are you nervous? You're so asking to be smacked.

But I was really surprised by what he did earlier. Such a troublemaker. He was fully leaning into the teasing from Kiko and completely going along with the antics of my former teammates. If I could've buried him in the sand, I would've.

So I couldn't take him seriously when… he confessed to me that he liked me. Well, who would've thought he'd fall for me, right? No one saw it coming. No one felt it. It was like a mushroom suddenly popping up out of nowhere, announcing that he liked me.

And all I could think at that moment was:
What kind of animal are you?

But I didn't question his sexuality or why or how he came to like me. What really surprised me was how suddenly he started making scenes and bothering me during those times when… I had feelings for someone else.

Maybe just like how I couldn't believe he liked me, people might not believe that… I once had feelings for Kai.

Yes, I used to have feelings for Kaizen, one of my friends and teammates… my libero.

I thought I was straight at first.

But Kai was the one who made me realize otherwise.

I don't know how it happened, but I know it didn't happen quickly. Maybe because we were roommates in the dorm? Or maybe because I often ate with him and bonded with him, especially during training? Or maybe because we talked so much? Or perhaps there's a special connection between a setter and a libero?

Or maybe it was because I got carried away with all the small gestures I'd do to him—like messing up his soft hair, pinching his marshmallow-like cheeks, putting my arm around him because he's smaller than me, or smiling at him every morning when he woke up still half-asleep.

All of that, I knew, meant nothing to him.

But for me? It was my chance to show and express that, yes, I liked him. Until I didn't even notice how deep my feelings had become.

But I held myself back. Aside from knowing I had no chance with Kai, I saw him as too pure. He was probably the most positive person I'd ever met. Whenever he wanted to achieve something, I'd always hear him say, *"Let's manifest this."*

He was too pure in my eyes—I was afraid I'd scare him if I showed my feelings. So I took a step back.

I became like an older brother to him. A friend. A teammate. A captain. I think I've done everything except become his boyfriend.

In short, I calmed my feelings. I did everything to stop myself from falling too hard for Kai, even though deep down I knew it was already too late. Because honestly, I saw no hope. Kai was too innocent, and I was scared we'd end up awkward if he found out how I felt about him.

And I didn't want that. I couldn't imagine us ignoring each other.

So far, things had been okay.

Kai, oblivious to how fast my heart raced whenever we were close.

And me, secretly kilig to the point where I felt like I was taking advantage of our status as teammates. But as they say, when you move too slowly, you don't realize someone else has already taken the lead.

Then Roen Alejo suddenly entered the scene.

Even though I'd often see him staring at Kai whenever our schools faced off, I still couldn't believe he also had feelings for my teammate. I didn't know how it started between them, but what I knew for sure was that he was ahead of me.

"Coach, Kai's smiling while chatting with someone!"

I was smiling and laughing when I said that, but deep inside, I was restless. Since when had they been chatting? Had it been going on for a while? How did they start talking? Who sent the first message? I had so many questions, which I masked with teasing, but Kai denied everything.

All I said then was, that's just how Kaizen is. He has a friendly vibe, so maybe Alejo from Westmore was just trying to be friends. I even joked that maybe Alejo felt guilty because he accidentally hit Kai in the face once during a game.

But when I saw them messaging each other almost all night one evening, that's when I really started to panic.

Kai's smile during those moments—it was different.

It was the first time I'd seen him smile like that.

"Got a date tonight, huh?" I asked Kai when I saw him dressed up.

I asked even though I already knew the answer. He was meeting up with the person he'd been chatting with all night—Roen Alejo. Where were they going? Who initiated it? Was it Alejo? Or Kai? My head hurt from overthinking, but I still smiled in front of our libero.

"No—"

Of course, he denied it. Tsk. "Who? Your girlfriend from Baguio? Is she here in Manila?"

"No—"

"Does Coach know about this, Kai? Oh no! But don't worry, it'll be our little secret," I said, pretending to zip my mouth shut.

We went back and forth for a bit. Was he denying it, or was he just refusing to tell me?

"So you're meeting up with a guy?" I teased him again.

But of course, he didn't say anything. And I let it go because I suddenly got scared he'd figure out how much I wanted to tag along with them—even if it meant being the third wheel. At least I could make sure Kai was safe with him since we didn't really know Alejo that well yet.

And that's how Kai and Roen's love story began.

I still remember the nights I cried because of heartbreak. Seriously, I cried. That's when I realized how painful it was to cry silently. What if Kai woke up? So I had to stifle every sob. It hurt my throat, but I didn't care. That's how it is when you're hurting.

That's also when I truly realized how deep my feelings for Kaizen had become.

Sounds stupid, right? But that's how it is when you see firsthand the person you've dreamed of for so long slipping away to someone else, isn't it?

I admit, I kept smiling in the days that followed, but I was genuinely hurting. Thankfully, no one asked me if I was okay because I might've burst into tears.

But damn, I never expected my first love to be so traumatic.

That's when I finally let myself fall, only to realize there was no one there to catch me. But it was my fault too—I never confessed. I was too late. I had so many "what ifs" back then. But my biggest "what if" was: what if I hadn't been so shy with Kai?

Could we have been together?

Would he have given me a chance?

Would Alejo have stopped pursuing him?

Well, they say regret always comes last. But how tall is this regret that it always shows up at the end? And if it's so tall, why didn't I see it sooner?

So yeah, the feelings I had for Kaizen—I buried them deep in the ground. And I guess I'll throw them into the pit too.

Of course, as Kai's friend and team captain, I supported him and Alejo. Sometimes, I even covered for him when he left the dorm for their dates. I'd tell the building guard to let Kai in even if he came home late.

I knew Alejo would bring him back on time, but it was just to be sure.

And that was one of the reasons I supported Kai and Alejo. Alejo—the pretty boy—was too perfect for Kai. There was nothing I could do but support them because it was clear how much he loved Kaizen.

Who was I to stand in their way, right?

It hurt, yes, but at the same time, I was happy for the person I loved when I saw him happy with the person he loved.

All I told myself was this: if Alejo ever makes Kai cry, I'll make sure I'm there for our libero. I'll comfort him because I know he'll cry.

Even though I wanted to beat up Alejo if he ever hurt Kai, I knew I wouldn't be able to. That guy's huge—look at those arms! Maybe I'd just have to accompany Kai to get him cursed or something, just in case.

But I never expected that in the middle of my moving-on process, someone… problematic would suddenly show up.

"Guys, this is Carlos. Best friend of number eleven. Opposite hitter from Westmore."

I remember the day Kai introduced him to me. It was Alejo's birthday, and we were in La Union. I already knew Carlos was Alejo's best friend, but that was the first time we were formally introduced to each other.

"Nice to meet you," I said as I shook his hand.

"Same here," he replied seriously, looking all proper, but little did I know he was hiding something mischievous.

That night was fun. The super twins, Kiko and Paul, led the chaos, with Vince egging them on—I don't even know how we managed to stay quiet at times. Occasionally, Kai joined their conversations. Meanwhile, Alejo, Drew, and I stayed quiet, just smiling at their jokes.

What I didn't expect was for Alejo's best friend to join in on the noise.

This guy talks a lot?

He laughs so hard! Look at him, all over the place.

He's talkative in a way that he can keep up with Kiko's antics. I don't even know where he gets his corny jokes from.

And honestly, I felt like this Carlos had a bit of an arrogant vibe in the way he carried himself and spoke. Maybe it was because I was surprised when he took off his polo shirt and casually flexed his muscles?

Oh, so you're the big guy now? Smooth-skinned and fair too.

And your nipples are pink.

Before I knew it, I found myself touching my own chest. Tsk. Why am I suddenly feeling insecure, Rome? Your chest is fine too, right? Yeah, my nipples aren't pink, but isn't it weird if they were and I'm not fair-skinned? Sure, my abs aren't as visible, but my chest is nice, Rome. Remember that.

Plus, you know this Carlos is from Westmore because he's a bit *conyo* (pretentious). A typical rich kid, a Manila Filipino-Chinese boy. It's not that I'm saying everyone who studies there is *conyo*, but there's this inside joke about them being like that. Kai also mentioned that Alejo is *conyo* too, so I believed it.

Now I understand why Alejo and Carlos became best friends despite their completely different personalities. Turns out they speak the same language—the *conyo* language.

I wasn’t really engaging much in their conversations because I was distracted. You know why… Kai and Alejo were sitting next to each other. Clearly, they’re already a thing.

It’s annoying how I keep catching myself staring at them. I keep wondering what it would feel like if I were the one sitting next to Kai. If it were my chest he was leaning on now…

Tsk. What an idiot, Jerome Christopher.

Weren’t you supposed to be in the moving-on stage?

Look how happy Kai is. Why can’t you just accept it so everyone’s happy?

"Kai and Roen look sweet together, don’t they?"

I turned to look at Carlos when he suddenly said that. We were the only ones left in the cottage while the others were down by the shore, swimming. I didn’t know why Carlos stayed behind, but I thought maybe I’d move on faster if I watched Kai and Alejo being sweet from afar.

But it wasn’t working. I still felt like an idiot watching them, consumed by "what ifs" and "what could’ve been."

Damn love.

"Yeah," I absentmindedly replied to Carlos.

"Do you want something like that too?"

"Huh?"

What? Did he just ask if I wanted something like… what? Was he referring to Kai and Alejo? Was he asking if I wanted to splash around in the water and cuddle too?

"I can do that too."

I understood even less of what Carlos was saying. What was this guy talking about? Was he drunk? I looked at the glass he was holding. Was it alcohol? But we didn’t order any drinks, right?

"Are you drunk?" I asked.

He just laughed. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

I frowned. Damn, this guy changes topics fast.

"No," I answered.

"Me neither. I don’t have one."

I wanted to say, "No one asked," but whatever—he just felt like sharing, I guess.

To distract myself somehow, especially since Kai and Alejo were hugging in the distance, I asked Carlos why he didn’t have a girlfriend. If you think about it, he gives off playboy vibes. Okay, fine, I judged him earlier, but those were my first impressions of him.

A typical player using his chinky eyes to charm women.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly wondered if I had a type—chinky-eyed guys or girls? Well, Kai has round eyes, but honestly, I don’t have a specific preference. No matter the shape of Kai’s eyes, I’d probably still like him.

"I don’t do girlfriends," Carlos replied, still looking at me.

I nodded. See? A player. He doesn’t do relationships but probably has had plenty of flings.

"Oh. One-night stands only, huh?"

I saw him frown and look flustered. "No. I… don’t like girls."

My mouth dropped open. What? He doesn’t like girls? Then what does he like? Boys? Or maybe he doesn’t like girls because he prefers mature, strong, independent women?

"Uhm…" I didn’t know what to say.

"I don’t like other boys either," he said slowly, his gaze fixed on me. And for some reason, I suddenly got nervous about what he was going to say next. "I only like you, Jerome."

What the hell?

What?

I only like you, Jerome.

The hell? Did I hear that right? What does that mean? Does he like me as in *like*-like? Or does he just like me as an acquaintance since we literally just met earlier?

What kind of "like"? Damn, is Alejo’s best friend messing with me? I’d rather hear his corny jokes from earlier than listen to this nonsense coming out of his mouth!

I looked toward the sea because my vision was starting to blur because of him. But that was a wrong move because it only got worse when I saw Alejo kissing Kai’s cheek.

These two are really into PDA! Have some respect for someone who’s trying to move on, okay?

I wouldn’t be surprised if someone catches them again, takes a picture, and posts it on TikTok.

But I wasn’t going to focus on them right now because there was an animal here beside me who was seriously tripping me up.

"That’s not a funny joke," I said seriously.

"Do I look like I’m joking?" he replied just as seriously.

We stared at each other. I was starting to feel irritated by this fool. What’s your deal, Carlos? Is he always like this? We just met, and he’s already saying things like this?

"Damn," I laughed, but it was sarcastic. Hopefully, this idiotic best friend of Alejo would get the hint. "It’s fine, bro. You almost had me convinced—"

"I told you, I’m not joking. I really like you, Jerome."

I froze for a moment. Damn, he actually repeated it!

"You're not?"

"Yes."

"Damn… are you gay—"

"Yes. Very much so for you."

That was it—I stood up. Damn this guy, he just wouldn't stop?! I glared at him, furious, but this fool didn't even flinch! He even smirked like he was so proud of himself and what he'd done!

That's when I felt such anger that I wanted to hurt him right then and there!

"Damn you! We barely know each other, and this is the kind of joke you pull? Let's just fight!"

"I'll let you punch me, but only if I get to kiss you afterward. Deal?"

"Are you not going to stop?!"

"Why should I stop liking you—"

"You idiot!" I shouted and walked away from him.

But this animal just laughed! I glanced back once to glare at him, but I was shocked when he suddenly winked at me. Damn you, Carlos Yu!

Don't get me wrong. I'm not mad or disgusted because he's a guy saying he likes me. Of all people, I should be the last one to judge since I like guys too. What pisses me off is that we barely know each other, and yet he says something like this?

If it's true that he really likes me, when did that even start? Because I don't remember us ever interacting before. It's only now! That's why I strongly feel like he's just messing with me.

And above all, what I hate the most is that we're not even close, and he's pulling this kind of prank on me.

Even Kiko gets punched by me sometimes. So what more Carlos? Tsk.

The rest of the night went badly for me while Carlos Yu just kept smirking and shamelessly sneaking glances at me. As much as I wanted to wipe that smirk off his face, I couldn't because Kai might wonder why I suddenly got mad at his boyfriend's best friend.

So what I did instead was make sure we were never left alone in the same space. There always had to be someone else around because I honestly didn't trust what this fool might do. I felt like he might just suddenly try to kiss me! If he did that, we'd definitely end up in a brawl. He better just try.

And I thought he was just messing with me that night. I didn't think he'd become part of the days ahead in my life.

This fool just wouldn't stop bothering me! Messages after messages! Calls after calls! Chats after chats! Attention-seeking nonstop! And whenever our paths crossed, he wouldn't stop teasing me!

Meanwhile, I was practically having heart palpitations from how angry I was at him. This fool was delighted to see me getting irritated by his nonsense. Add to that Kiko egging him on! All these animals ganging up on me!

In my mind, I kept thinking, hasn't Carlos had enough of messing with me? What does he even want from me? Because I still didn't believe that he actually liked me.

I was already regretting not punching him that night.

"Good morning, Jerome. Eat already. Or else I'll eat you. Naks!"

"Jerome, are you a spoon? Because even before you get close, I'm already gaping. Naks!"

"Papa Jerome, your name is so long. Want to shorten it? Let's just call you Jerome Yu. Naks!"

"Jerome, I wish you were my setter. I'm done with Lance."

"Jerome, my love, so sweet, reply already, okay? I get that you're kilig when I message you, but reply first before you faint."

"All you reply with is 'fuck you.' But why is it that when I read it, the 'fuck' turns into 'love'?"

"There you go again, 'fuck you' again. Do you want it already? Send your location, and I'll be there. Naks!"

"I love you, Jerome, even though you keep ignoring me. Something's dripping… oh, it's my tears."

"Good luck on your game, baby. You can do it. Want a good luck kiss? Hehe."

"I sent you food. Of course, I'm tastier than that, but consider it a preview. Next time, you can mukbang me. I won't resist, promise."

"Hopefully, one of these days you'll fall for me. Me, I've already fallen hard for you. Long ago. Shouldn't you feel shy? Show some empathy. My face is already so thick-skinned, lol!"

"Pol got stuck in the swimming pool. I'm Pol. You're the swimming pool. Hehe."

"Jerome, can't I hold your chest even a little? I'll use it as a stress ball. Or just let me poke it! Even that would be enough! Please?"

"I wish I were the ball so you could hold me too. But never mind, because you'd probably just spike me."

"Have a good day, Jerome. As for me, my day isn't good. I sprained my ankle during training earlier. It's not serious, but it'll heal right away if you kiss it. My feet smell nice, don't they? Still acting all shy?"

"Jerome, what's up? If I get arranged marriage, don't blame me, okay? Don't cry! Just kidding! Of course, I wouldn't agree to it, just in case."

"I'll fight for you with Ahma. Naks!"
"Did you hear my voice message? I'm great at singing, right? Your balls probably got kilig. Ayieee!"
"Jerome, I miss you."
"Wǒ zhēn de hěn ài nǐ." *(I really love you.)*

Those were just a few of his endless messages. Until we graduated, he never stopped! He should've had his phone confiscated because he was so annoying! But what's even more annoying is that I couldn't bring myself to block him. Don't ask me why—because even I don't know. Damn him.

The only reason I could think of was that I used his string of morning messages as my alarm clock. It was helpful when I had classes or training, but it was irritating when I didn't need to wake up early.

But maybe… I'll admit… I just got used to his messages being the first thing I saw when I woke up.

Even though I hardly replied. Even though I rarely paid attention to him. Even though all I knew how to say to him were curses. Even though I wanted to punch him, whether virtually or in person.

And I don't know… One day, I suddenly realized that I had already moved on from Kai.

But I couldn't admit it to myself back then—that a huge part of it was because of Carlos.

And when I found out we'd be teammates at the professional level in our volleyball careers, I pretended I wasn't happy. I acted like I was upset that we'd be seeing each other almost every day during training. But deep down, I was so excited that I'd finally be his setter.

Damn, congratulations, Carlos Yu.

Mission accomplished, you fool.

Who would've thought? All those years of messing with me finally bore fruit. One day, I just woke up and realized… I liked him.

Damn it, I liked him.

I liked Carlos Yu.

"I do," I answered his question. "You can do it too, right?"

My heart was pounding so hard as I slowly moved closer to him. His lips were still slightly parted, and he kept blinking nervously. I wanted to laugh at his dumbfounded face, but this wasn't the time for that.

It was my turn to confess.

"Rome…" he called my name, his voice trembling.

I didn't say anything. I just kept moving closer until our faces were only inches apart. And now that I could see him this close, I admitted to myself that this guy was really, really handsome.

But I wouldn't tell him that today. Maybe next year. I had a strong feeling his ego was already big enough.

"Carlos," my voice came out hoarse.

"Y-Yes?"

I smirked. "Why are you stuttering?"

"W-Was I?"

"Yes. And you still are."

I saw him swallow hard. His Adam's apple bobbed, and I accidentally licked my lips. Damn, this fool was sexy.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

"N-No."

My smirk widened. I raised my right index finger and pressed it against his chest. I felt him stiffen, but I teased him further by trailing my finger downward… toward his nipple.

I saw him close his eyes and take a deep breath. And when he opened them again, I could see all the emotions he'd been holding back but never hid from me.

"You can do it too, right, Los?" I asked again, my voice sounding unfamiliar even to myself.

"Rome, if you don't stop doing this, I'm going to kiss you right here, right now," he said in a deep voice.

Pfft. I just smiled and, using my left hand, I touched him… there.

I almost melted when I felt how big and hard he was. What the fuck, Carlos.

He was surprised, but he didn't push my hand away. But soon, his expression changed, like he wanted to devour me. Well, let him try.

"Carlos," I called him.

"Yes, baby?"

"I want you too," I confessed. "I want you."

He froze for a moment, staring deeply into my eyes.

"Repeat what you just said, Jerome."

"I want you, Carlos," I obeyed his command.

"Really?"

"Really."

"You sure?"

"Don't you want me? I can take it back—"

"Oh, what the hell."

I almost fell into his chest when he suddenly pulled me closer by my waist. And before I could recover, I felt his lips on mine.

He was aggressive at first, but his kiss gradually softened. His hands were still gripping my waist, while mine rested on his broad chest.

Damn. This guy was good at kissing!

I lost count of how many minutes we spent kissing. All I knew was that it was a long time—a really, really long time. By the time our lips parted, we were both gasping for air.

We stared directly into each other's eyes until he smiled, so I smiled back.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you," I replied.

"I know there’s another guest room here at Roen’s. Want to continue this—"

"Jerome? Carlos?"

We nearly jumped in surprise when we saw Kai and Roen, along with Kiko, Paul, Vince, and Drew, all staring at us in shock. Roen was grinning ear to ear, while my former teammates’ jaws were practically on the floor.

"Captain, what’s this? Why… why are you and Daddy Carlos making out?" Kiko asked dramatically.

Carlos and I just exchanged glances. I laughed because it was obvious from his face that he was disappointed we got interrupted. Score one for him—he turned me straight into stone.

I took his hand, and we both turned to face our friends.

"We’re together now," I said with a big smile.

"Yeah," Carlos added. "Me and Papa Jerome are official."

The end.